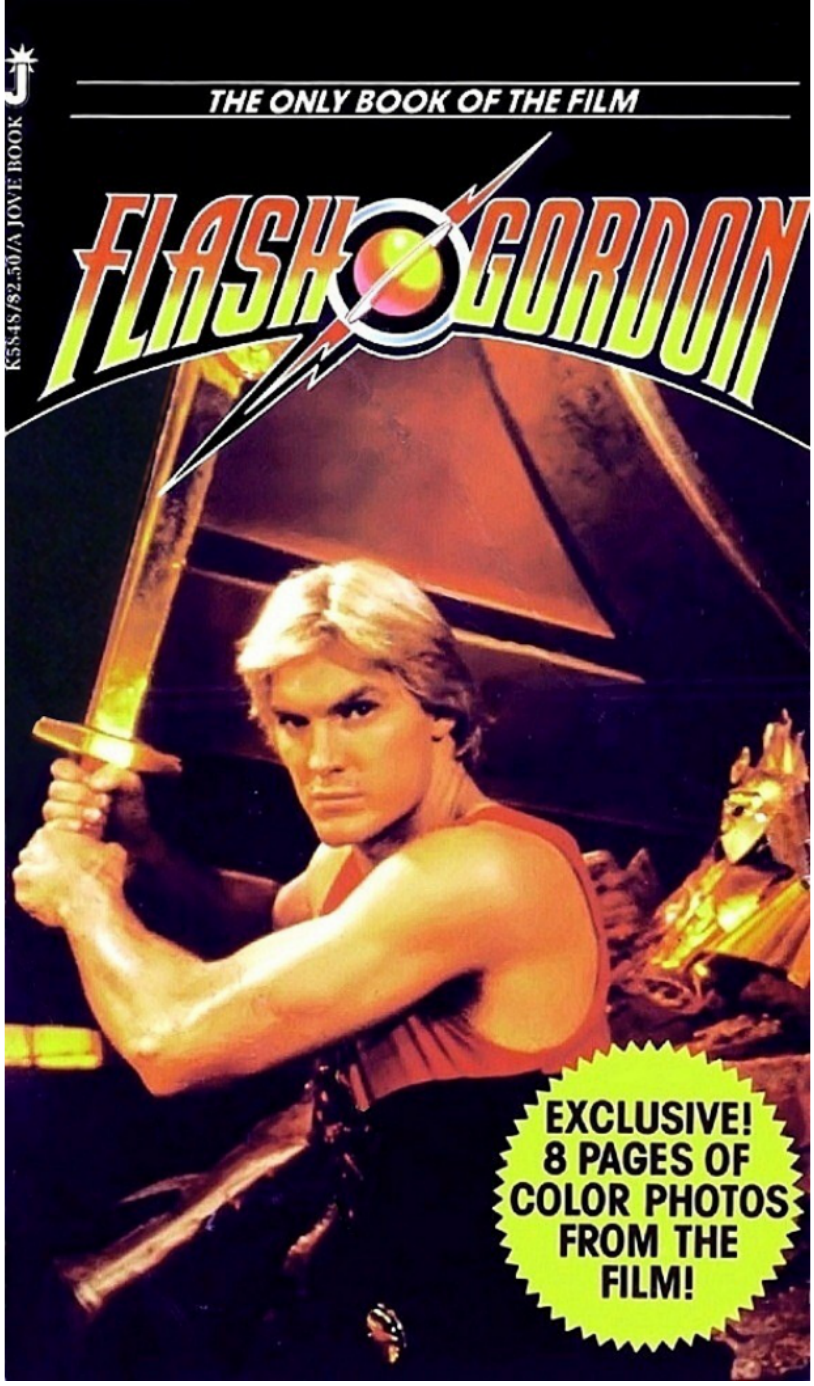
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DUEL IN THE SKY

Far below the royal perch of the Hawk Men leader, a great battle disk glimmered in the sunlight, supported on a giant shaft, its surface greased and ready.

Flash saw it and groaned—there was nothing under it but the bottomless sky.

He and Barin, Prince of Arboria, were to duel, clad in loincloths and armed only with whips.

They entered the ring and the disk began to tilt and sway, sending Flash slipping and sliding to the lower side. Jumping at the advantage, Barin struck, his whip tearing Flash's weapon from his hand.

The Hawk Men leader touched a button and hundreds of knives shot up from the battle floor. He grabbed at Flash, bending his body back, back toward the deadly knives.

"Flash!" Dale's voice rang out. "We have less than twelve hours to save the Earth . . ."

The disk tilted dangerously toward the sky . . .

A NOVEL BY
ARTHUR BYRON COVER
BASED ON A SCREENPLAY BY
LORENZO SEMPLE, JR.

A JOVE BOOK

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Jove Publications, Inc., 200 Madison Avenue,
New York, NY 10016

First Jove edition published December 1980
ISBN: 0515058483

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Jove books are published by Jove Publications, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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The author thanks Charly Lippincott and Linda Levine for their valuable assistance during the composition of this fast-action extravaganza.

For many reasons, the author would like to acknowledge the cast of thousands who have worked at the Change of Hobbit Speculative Fiction Bookstore in Los Angeles, including Mayer, Mike, Victor, Alan, Barry, Tad, Bill, Gil, Mark, and anyone else, especially one Sherry Gottlieb, and most especially (for personal reasons) one Lydia Marano.

FLASH GORDON

PROLOGUE

Cosmic Pawns

"UNDERLING, I am weary."

The unconcerned voice which replied to the statement was incapable of warmth or pity. It had never expressed a passion, not even the tacit admission of an emotion. "O Master, what might I do to relieve the weariness which has so mercilessly beset you?"

A pause. "You might amuse me."

"For the purposes of amusement, there is your harem of submissive, willing slaves."

"With sleek bodies tanned by discriminating applications of artificial light, that I know. I am not interested in that sort of amusement." Another pause. "Perhaps later."

"You have your scholars to present all manner of inventive and obscure arguments for your approval."

"Underling, today I have no desire to listen to a cowardly old man with quivering knees lecture me on the finer points of logic."

"Does it not please you to listen to philosophers explain why life is meaningful only beneath the iron hand of your august rule?"

"It pleases me, but it does not relieve my boredom."

"I might arrange for your tributes to be given within the hour."

"Do not bother; it can wait."

"Is there a duty of state which might please you?"

Another pause, this one long and heavy. "Klytus."

"O Master."

"What would you say if I informed you that my weariness was the result of my singular loneliness?"

"I would reply that the loneliness of a star blazing in the vacuum of space is a small price to pay for imperial greatness, for the vast spirit which rules the nine moons of a kingdom that is truly the center of the universe."

"You would make such a reply?"

"Indeed I would, Sire, without hesitation—that is, if you were to say

that you were lonely."

"Do you believe I am lonely?"

"No, Sire, though if you were to say you were, then I would believe it instantly, with all my soul."

"Klytus, you disappoint me."

The unconcerned voice expressed the barest hint of surprise. "Sire! How have I failed thee?"

"As We cannot condemn the space-hound for its savagery, We cannot fault thee for shortcomings inherent in thy very nature."

"I exist only to serve you."

"And, Klytus—*you have no soul."*

"I kneel corrected." The rustle of robes brushing against metal.

A sigh. "Tell Us, Klytus, since it appears We are doomed to suffer this weariness, at least for the time being, what affair of state should We choose to help Us wile away the hours?"

"Perhaps—the testing of a civilization?"

"Hmmm, yes. The life or death of millions upon millions. That might send the blood flowing through these tired veins. Have the computers make their selection."

A hand sheathed in golden metal reached out and flicked a switch. It pushed a button and waited patiently before a slot. Green, yellow, and red lights flashed. There were pings and scraping sounds. A white card slipped from the slot into the sheathed hand.

"The computers have selected an insignificant planet in Sector 468G29, Sire."

"Not Sector 468G29! It's so dreary, so relentlessly, dreadfully *boring.* Its dullness is legendary even in the society of the drones beneath Our fair citadel. Nothing interesting ever happens there."

"The prospects do not please me either, Sire, but according to the computers, there has been an inexplicable oversight. This planet's civilization has never before been tested."

"Oh?"

"We must test this insignificant planet in this dreadfully boring sector for the protection of the realm."

"Very well. And have the maintenance man and current programmer executed."

"O Master, they were executed last week for that little error which allowed Vultan to conceal his daughter's existence for so long."

"Have their replacements executed."

“They have not yet been appointed.”

“Select a few volunteers then, Klytus, and inform them of the price of failure.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Proceed.”

“Yes, Master.”

The sheathed hand pressed buttons and flicked switches, the computer bank hummed as connections were made, gears slipped into place, and electrons coursed through coils. Waves of interference flowed across the view screen in the center of the console. Bright stars gradually appeared, floating like scoops of radioactive dust in the blackness. It was Sector 468G29.

The Master stifled an imperial yawn. A hand in a scintillating red glove waved. “Please, Klytus, I’ve no desire for sightseeing. I can do that while I meditate. Proceed more quickly.”

“Yes, Sire.” The sheathed hand turned a knob and on the screen appeared a blue world partially enveloped by white and gray mists and orbited by a barren rocky moon. The world was Earth.

“What do you know of this world’s civilization, Klytus?”

“Surely not enough to satisfy your endless thirst for knowledge, Sire.”

“Please try.”

“The civilization has reached Level Two, but the intellect of the inhabitants does not deal with it rationally. A peculiar personality trait, which all the inhabitants possess to some degree, is an amazing ability to refuse responsibility for their own actions, or for their existences, in general. To this end they live in a number of principalities, each with its own government, but there is no dictator to cut through red tape and bureaucracies. I must say, Sire, they are not very reasonable.”

“Interesting, interesting.”

“They possess other unusual qualities, Sire, including a philosophical outlook unique throughout the galaxies, though it has presented them with little advantage.”

“And what is that, Klytus?”

“The deeds and thoughts of life are somewhat arbitrarily divided between those they call ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ The good are supposed to make life better for all people, and the evil worsen it.”

“And is this planet a utopia of well-meaning intentions, a paradise of delight?”

“No, Sire, not in the least. Only a few can meet the behavioral standards which are the results of their ideals, and the others but pretend. There are many ways of carrying out the pretense. One method is to set up a huge faceless body called a ‘corporation’ which insulates each man from the results of his decisions. Orders are carried out through long chains of command so that when a decision backfires, creating an inordinate amount of pollution or contaminating a village, the person truly responsible can blame underlings or forces beyond his control. Therefore, he can believe he is successfully continuing the pretense of meeting the high philosophical standards.”

“And what is the so-called purpose of these corporations, Klytus?”

“To amass tremendous amounts of credits, so that the rewards of the capitalistic schemes can be utilized to earn more profits.”

“Why do they not simply demand tribute from their underlings?”

“As I said, Sire, they are not reasonable.”

“Are the people of this civilization aware of the true size of the universe? Do they meditate regularly, experiencing the myriad forces of the cosmos?”

“A few do, Sire, but in the main that is not considered profitable.”

“Hmmm, I wonder if testing this planet will not be a waste of energy.”

“These people do possess potential.”

The master asked abruptly, “Would they think me good—or evil?”

“Evil, though I confess it is difficult for me to make the distinction between the two. The categories are, after all, arbitrary. If I might be permitted to add an observation . . .” A pause, during which, presumably, the Master indicated his assent. “This planet, called Earth in one of its predominant languages, has produced specimens of a temperament you might find admirable. Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Joseph Stalin. One man, Adolf Hitler by name, possessed the will, but his mind was not strong enough to cope and he became the victim of the very delusions he fostered upon others. Our seers have peered through the veils of time, into alternate dimensions, and they have informed me of the specimens this planet might spawn in the future. Yes, this world is currently insignificant, but there is potential here, potential we must be aware of.”

“It matters not. We can destroy the world if We choose.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Begin the test.”

The sheathed hand manipulated more controls. Momentarily, red and green waves stabbed at the barren moon.

“Do you remain weary, O Master?” asked the unconcerned voice.

“Indeed. But now I ponder upon the indisputable fact that unsuspecting millions depend upon my whim for their very existence, and the knowledge that I might crush them raises my spirits.”

“They are but insects, Sire, pawns of cosmic forces they cannot comprehend.”

“For one who feigns ignorance, Klytus, you seem to know much about this Earth in Sector 468G29.”

“Cosmic pawns are my hobby, Sire.”

“Good. It is a useful hobby, and you are useful to Us. We cannot help but notice that this life-or-death situation the unsuspecting Earth faces has excited Us. We shall retire and visit Our harem. Continue the testing while We exorcise some of Our majestic passions.”

“As you command.”

1

Flash Gordon Scores

FLASH GORDON would have gladly divided the thoughts and deeds of the world into two distinct and arbitrary categories, but like many young people of his age, he realized that throughout the course of history the distinction had never been an easy one. When he had seen the newspaper photographs of a South Vietnamese officer ruthlessly executing a prisoner by shooting him in the head, Flash noted that no honorable man would commit such an act without the formalities of due process. Nor did he believe the National Guardsmen who had slaughtered the student demonstrators at Kent State to be honorable, courageous men; instead, he believed that protesting the senseless brutality of war was an act every bit as "American," if not every bit as brave, as fighting and dying for the ideals of the United States. He did not understand why a former President had not simply admitted he had lied. He did not understand the concept of executive privilege; executives had no more privileges than other men, and to be honest, however belatedly, was certainly no shame, even if one were surrounded by the liars and sycophants of Washington, D.C. He could not understand why the delegates of the United Nations, who professed to be waging a bloodless war for peace, allowed a terrorist, a murderer of innocent children, to brandish a machine gun at the podium, whatever the merits of his cause. The distinction between good and evil seemed irrelevant in a world which routinely permitted such events to occur. Flash Gordon never pondered these matters to the point where they grew tedious, but they affected him all the same.

Flash's mother had died of internal hemorrhaging three hours after she had given birth to him in a Tuscaloosa hospital. His father was a janitor at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, and one of his duties was sweeping a section of the stadium after a football game. Flash watched all the games for free, with the inevitable result that he dreamed of one day playing quarterback for the college team. He dreamed of nothing but football. During the week, he spent all his free hours playing it with other children. (Baseball bored him practically to tears, though as he grew older he acquired an intellectual appreciation of it.) He never confided his dreams to his father.

Maxwell Gordon had named his son "Flash" for reasons he could

never quite recall. The name was a joke he had made while in a drunken stupor the night of his wife's death. If Maxwell was both father and mother to his child, it was only because he felt it was his duty, never because he truly loved the boy. When Flash was five and capable of taking care of himself without getting into too many fights and making too much of a mess, Maxwell left him alone to play sandlot football or to listen to the football games on the radio. After a time he acknowledged the boy, only to condemn him as the killer of his wife. Maxwell often threatened to kill Flash. He raged at the youth between drinks from his bottle of Southern Comfort, but Flash endured the cruel words with an infuriating compassion. Flash never hated his father; he understood that Maxwell carried within him a tortuous grief time could never heal, and that Maxwell dealt with it in the only fashion he knew.

Sometimes Flash heard his father making love to waitresses in the bedroom or in the kitchen, but he was not upset or confused. His father's escapades inspired him only to turn up the radio a little and to lean forward on the couch, to be closer to the speaker. He imitated the announcers of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, sometimes pretending to be them rather than the quarterbacks. He whispered their words, he strove to talk like them in all respects. They became more real than the friends he made during the sandlot games, and, as a consequence, his southern accent became subdued. As he grew older, he lost it completely. The environment had not molded him; he had molded himself.

Maxwell Gordon died when Flash was twelve. Maxwell had gotten in a fight with a young lady in a bar. It turned out the lady was fifteen and her father had taken exception to her plans for the night. The perpetrator, a county clerk as well as a lifelong Democrat, pleaded self-defense. Since all the customers in the bar had been so involved in their own affairs and so uninterested in the fight that they had not seen who had pulled out the knife, Maxwell's murderer was put on probation for six months. Flash bore the county clerk no malice; he believed the man would still have to face the justice of his conscience.

It was only at the funeral that Flash realized just how alone his father had been. The pallbearers were employed by the funeral parlor, and the services were attended by Flash, Maxwell's superintendent, another janitor, and Flash's maiden aunt, the twin sister of his mother. They listened to a slightly inebriated Baptist preacher speak of the great spirit and noble heart of Maxwell Gordon. Flash could not help but notice that the preacher offered no specifics.

His aunt Candace took him to a small farm she owned in the northern part of the state. When Flash wasn't at school or helping the

hired hands, he threw a football through a limp tire hanging from a gnarled tree in the backyard. For his birthday, Candace gave him a brand new football, and now Flash was able to throw two before retrieving them. When he became bored throwing with his right arm and needed a challenge to sustain his interest, he learned to throw with his left arm. At night he studied and read the paperback mysteries Candace was addicted to. Although the young Flash never fully comprehended the passions that drove a person to commit murder, he could not deny his fascination with the individual who guildessly defied the most important law of society, and he could not deny his relief when the detective finally exposed the culprit.

During the summer, when the work was done or could be easily done without him, when the heat was unendurable and each breath made the lungs seem fragile and weak, when his aunt was sitting in the living room and sweating so much that her bra showed plainly through her dress, when everybody else was dead to the world or wished they were, Flash walked through the high brown grass of the fields and climbed the lonely wire fences with rotting posts the dry wind had beaten down over the years. He squinted in the harsh sunlight radiating from a blue sky so deep and pure that he felt it wash over him and cool his skin. His shirt slung over his shoulder, his back and chest and underarms dripping as if someone had poured a bucket of water over him, he stared at the distant shanties of the blacks and the tenant farmers. He heard the children's dim laughter as they sprayed each other with water from a hose. He heard the whine of a harmonica, the beating of hands and the stomping of feet. He climbed fences until he no longer saw the shanties, until he no longer heard the laughter or the harmonica.

He walked into the forest, into a peaceful world of shady trees. Part of his soul—he supposed that was what it was, he possessed no vocabulary through which he could analyze his spirit—embraced the essence of the silent trees. They became mysterious creatures somehow gifted with peace and long life and wisdom. The dark shadows eased the maniacal quality of his personality which forced him to throw footballs through a tire for hours. He was temporarily freed from the desire to excel and to justify the existence that had caused his mother's death and had ruined his father's life. In the forest, life and death mingled with the logic of the inevitable, and he pursued his communion with nature with his usual single-mindedness.

And the Forest in turn embraced him. Birds alighted on his shoulders. The coon and the possum did not fear him. Bucks ate leaves from his hand. Rabbits hopped behind him and the porcupine did not bristle as he walked by.

As he studied the silent, eternal battle of the plants, slowly strangling one another in the quest for growth and life, Flash realized death was not to be feared; nor was the death of those close to him to be mourned for years. During these trips to the woods, Flash exorcised himself of demons of which he had been unaware. And as he grew older, he always carried something of the tranquillity of the woods with him, a tranquillity never more potent than during those situations demanding the utmost of his physical skill, intelligence, and composure. This ability served him well during the months he played high-school football. He won a scholarship to the University of Alabama and eventually a position as starting quarterback for the New York Jets.

This inner peace served him when his aunt Candace died in an automobile accident, leaving him truly alone for the first time. It served him during the tumultuous political events of the sixties and during the gloomy aftermath of the seventies. It helped him to grow into a tall, strong man who carried his bulky muscles with the grace of a gymnast. His hair and eyebrows were blond. His dark eyes possessed a sensitivity and capacity for compassion one did not normally expect of a high-salaried football player; they marked a man who analyzed emotional and spiritual matters as well as the corporal. His handsome face, unscarred by the rough-and-tumble years of football, radiated something of the romantic poet, who perceived eons of evolution in the shape of a rose and who bowed to eternity beneath the canopy of stars. If it had not been for his childhood dreams, Flash never would have been a football player. He liked the game and his skill was unparalleled, but he disapproved of brutality for its own sake; he would have broken his contract and quit the team of a coach who said, “Winning’s the only thing!”

Sportswriters were not the first to notice these unusual qualities in Flash Gordon. Women from every walk of life noticed them at once, and they responded deeply, while men could but react with confusion. However, the unattached women who appealed strictly to Flash’s sexual instincts were invariably disappointed. Although Flash enjoyed the physical sensations of sex, its main attraction for him was the spiritual bond enjoyed by the participants. He had the reputation of being a playboy, a reputation fostered mainly by *People Magazine* and its ilk; he did little to perpetuate it.

However, the complex components of his personality and his convictions conspired to foster his reputation of having a temper which occasionally exploded.

“Damn it, Guiraldes!” exclaimed Flash. “You didn’t have to do that!”

There were two minutes and ten seconds remaining in the Super Bowl. The New Orleans air was warm, and a large bead of sweat singed with dirt rolled down Guiraldes's nose. The guard reached below his face mask and tenderly wiped the bruised skin and cartilage; his nose had been broken twice in the last playoff game, and fists and elbows were constantly slipping into his helmet. "Do what?" Guiraldes replied, sounding like a barroom bully.

Flash merely stared at him; he reined in the anger which caused his hands to shake uncontrollably, blurring his vision with a red glare. For the first time he realized how exhausted he was, how the fans' constant cheering and catcalling disgusted him, how his legs and arms hurt; there was also a constant throbbing in his bowels, the dull ache of gas. He tasted the salty sweat above his upper lip. The muscles around his rib cage hurt whenever he expanded his lungs, but his exhaustion would not permit him to inhale more slowly. He calmed himself with an effort. Unaware of his teammates gathering in a huddle, he returned the guard's glare. Gradually his jaw relaxed, and he nodded to himself, knowing what he had to do.

The gun signaling the two-minute warning fired.

Without looking at his comrades or at the assistants carrying towels and buckets of water onto the field, Flash removed his helmet, wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his breakaway jersey, and strode toward the sidelines.

Pretending not to notice the coach's wild-eyed expression, Flash said simply, "Replace Guiraldes. Put in Hank."

Coach Hodges bit down so hard on his unlit cigar that he tore it. He threw it to the ground and stomped on it, once, planting his foot as if he were a soldier jerking to attention. Spitting flecks of tobacco from his mouth, he said, "What the hell do you mean?" The remainder of his inquiry was phrased in language much more colorful.

"Guiraldes deliberately spiked Bulgarella's leg," said Flash, indicating a giant on the defensive team, who sat with a bored expression while an assistant quickly wrapped a bandage around his bare calf.

"Oh the poor baby."

"He's been pulling that sort of thing the entire game. He's caused at least ten injuries. I refuse to play with him any longer."

Coach Hodges's language lost its colorful appeal, becoming more direct; the essence of his statement was: *"You what?"*

"He goes or I go."

Coach Hodges tore a fresh cigar from its plastic wrapper. "Flash, let

me put it to you this way: This is the Super Bowl. I haven't the time or the inclination to deal with this kind of manure." He crumpled the plastic and tossed it into an empty bucket.

"That's right," Flash snarled, "this is the Super Bowl. There're two minutes left, we're behind by five points, we have the ball, but it's third down and six yards to go on our own twenty-five. Now who's got the best chance of pulling it out of the fire: Guiraldes or me?"

Coach Hodges bit down on his cigar. The tobacco spread throughout his mouth. He wiped his tongue with one motion of his hand, scraping off the debris on his jacket, and then yelled, "Hank, get in there and replace Guiraldes. Okay, Gordon, play clean if you have to, but get me that touchdown!"

Flash grinned. "Sure thing, Coach!"

Flash pressed his large hands on the center's inner thighs. He took the snap and immediately lobbed the football over to Ricky Robur, the left end. At once Flash was brought down by a linebacker crashing through the line. Robur had not expected the ball so quickly. He caught it between his left arm and right hand and almost dropped it as he took a chance and moved away from the sidelines to avoid a defensive back; but he and Flash both knew that if the pass had come three seconds later, it would have been intercepted. Coach Hodges, who did not know this, threw down his cigar, stomped on it savagely with both feet, slapped his forehead, closed his eyes, opened them, groaned, waved his arms about like those of a spasmodic windmill, called upon the gods and the fates, in addition to the good wishes of the stars and the ether, and pounded his fists on the shoulderpads of an unsuspecting and unprepared substitute, knocking him to the ground. When Hodges saw that Robur had gained enough yardage for the first down, he began a dance that would have trampled the substitute if he had not rolled away just in time. Three men tackled Robur at the forty, not allowing him to fall out of bounds and automatically stop the clock.

Picking himself up despite an overwhelming desire to lie down and quietly expire, Flash signaled for a time out.

The crowd roared its support or disapproval, forcing Flash to ask for silence twice while the team was huddled. During these brief periods of lowered volume, a red-faced Hodges shouted incomprehensible instructions. The play Flash called was entirely expected under circumstances such as these: a long pass.

Upon taking the snap, Flash dropped back quickly, cocking his arm to throw but wary of blitzing linebackers. He saw that all his eligible

receivers were covered by defensive backs, that the linebackers were watching for a short pass; his opponents did not care how much yardage the Jets gained, because a field goal would not give enough points to win the game; his opponents only wished to prevent the Jets from scoring a touchdown.

Flash was very much aware of the responsibilities of the moment; all the effort and the hopes of this season now depended upon his actions of the next few seconds. He had teammates who deserved the bonus money that came with winning the Super Bowl, the teammates who deserved the pride that came with victory. He was aware of the cheering crowd, of the millions watching television in their homes or in bars. How the millions would perceive him tomorrow would also be determined by his success or failure, but Flash did not give that final thought a moment's consideration. Instead, he summoned the sensation of peace and calm he had developed in the Alabama forest, and he realized that regardless of what he decided to do, it would be correct.

Many a sportswriter had commented that Flash Gordon played football with the aplomb that only the spiritually whole could achieve.

A defensive guard slipped through the offensive line; he slipped past the offensive halfback. Flash tucked the football safely under his arm and maneuvered past a defensive end in such a manner that the end and the onrushing guard collided. Flash dashed past the offensive line.

His action was so daring and unexpected that for many seconds—about fifteen yards' worth—all the players on the field were stunned. Even the crowd in the stands was awed and hushed.

And then it dawned on everyone that Flash Gordon was making a mad fifty-five yard sprint for the goal line.

The crowd roared, shaking fists and throwing trash high in the air.

Coach Hodges screamed for an assistant to bring his digitalis.

Network announcers were speechless, stunned at the sight of the exhausted quarterback making a run comparable only to that of the great Jim Brown.

Seized by an exhilaration he would later describe as unholy, Flash had never felt more alive. He instinctively side-stepped and stiff-armed tacklers. One crashed directly into him, practically knocking his rib cage from his chest and causing a ringing in his ears that would not go away for ten minutes, but Flash shrugged him off, lowering his head and butting into the stomach of another defensive back, sending him flying backward into a heap five yards away. He was vaguely aware of Robur diving before the legs of another would-be tackler, tripping him headlong into the Astroturf. Flash was certain other

teammates had made key blocks during this play, and he was certain he would congratulate them next spring when they watched the game films together, but right now he was filled with the strength of his own spirit, with strength flowing into his arms and legs, strength molding his body and mind into one magnificent fighting machine, a true athlete!

Flash ran alone into the end zone.

He had scored the winning touchdown of the Super Bowl!

That night, while his teammates celebrated by carousing in the bars of the French Quarter of New Orleans, Flash sat beneath hot studio lights and taped an interview for a Saturday-morning children's show. He wore white jeans and a white T-shirt with his name inscribed in red over the chest; the T-shirt had been a gift from an anonymous admirer, and he wore it in the hopes that she (the odds favored the pronoun) would know he appreciated it.

"Yes, Phyllis, I would say to children everywhere that if they want to be successful athletes, they should eat their breakfasts every morning and they should obey their parents and they should never tell a lie. Coaches don't like liars."

Phyllis Franklin, a prim former beauty queen whom the network had hired to add some glamour to their sports division, crossed her legs and folded her hands demurely over her knees. She raised her green skirt a half inch, ostensibly to straighten it, though its minor state of disarray would not be revealed on the home screen. A pretty woman, she had been recently divorced from an oil tycoon; her blond hair was cut short and made to rest immobile with a surfeit of concealed pins, but the effect made it seem as if she had used half a bottle of spray. "Do you think all children should aspire to be athletes, Mr. Gordon?"

Flash laughed. "Oh, of course not. Being fit and in shape is important, regardless of your profession, but playing pro football is just a job, and I would take the same amount of pride in my work if I was a newscaster, such as yourself, or an accountant, or an insurance agent. Or a janitor, as my father was."

"Would you care to tell us something about your humble beginnings?"

Flash smiled, sternly, so she would not mistake his meaning. "No one has humble beginnings. No one should ever be ashamed of his parents or his parents' work."

Phyllis's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open; for the first time she looked upon Flash Gordon as a human being and not as

another dim-witted hunk to be interviewed. Most of the players she had met had been callous brutes, in her opinion. “What other advice would you give today’s youth?”

“Oh, nothing very remarkable, I’m afraid. Remember that *hopefully* is an adverb. Speed kills. Avoid festival seating.”

Noticing the director signaling her to end the interview, Phyllis impulsively reached out and held Flash’s hand. “Thank you, Mr. Gordon,” she said. She realized the gesture would play badly on the home screen, so she released the hand and sat up straight again; but the damage to her interview had already been done. A curse appropriate to her critics burst into her thoughts, and she immediately felt more confident. “It’s been a pleasure having you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Franklin,” said Flash.

Phyllis turned toward the center camera. “That was Flash Gordon, quarterback for the World Champion New York Jets. And this is Phyllis Franklin, thanking you for joining us and urging you boys and girls to tune in next week when our guest on ‘The World of Sports’ will be George Plimpton, telling us about his recent stint boxing a kangaroo.”

The camera pulled back; after a few moments the brightest, hottest lights blinked off. Sighing with relief, Flash wiped sweat from his forehead.

Phyllis said, “Mr. Gordon, that was one of the best interviews I’ve ever done. Thank you.”

“Call me Flash . . . Phyllis.” He could not help but notice the crew was ignoring her; the director had acknowledged her with a brief wave before turning his attention to someone else. And Flash would be ignored as long as he talked to Phyllis.

“They don’t like me very much,” she said, deducing his thoughts from the movements of his eyes. “They think I don’t know anything about football.”

“You’ve come a long way since you started, and I bet that next season you know three times as much as you do now.”

She laughed, covering her mouth with her left hand. “But three times zero is zero.”

“Oh, Phyllis, you should think more highly of yourself. The average female’s ignorance of professional football is due to another cultural exclusion sexist, male-dominated society foists upon women. To prove to them”—he waved his hand—“that you know your subject, you’d have to demonstrate you know six times more than they do.”

They were silent for nearly half a minute, looking into one another’s

eyes. Flash felt a familiar emptiness in his chest, a yearning of his spirit to be cleansed of the afternoon's violence.

"Would you care to join me for a drink?" asked Phyllis.

"Where did you have in mind?"

"There's a nice bar around the corner." She removed several pins from her hair.

"My hotel is just two blocks away, and we can call room service."

"Let's go to my hotel." She shook her head so her hair would fall naturally; it wasn't so short after all. "My room service is a company expense."

Interlude

THREE months after the New York Jets won the Super Bowl, the bored monarch and Klytus decided to test the planet Earth.

The red and green rays materialized between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars; they had crossed unfathomable distances. The vastness of the universe did not pose a problem to the machinery at the Emperor's command.

The rays struck the moon before the few astronomers who saw them had the opportunity to adjust emotionally to the fact that they were witnessing a heretofore unknown phenomenon. An observer at Mount Wilson in Los Angeles noticed the rays only because he was examining a sector of the asteroid belt in their path; the asteroids struck by the red rays exploded, and those struck by the green disintegrated. Scowling and rubbing his chin, the observer decided the rays were the result of atmospheric interference, which in its turn was the result of a new weapon being tested by the Pentagon.

Astronomers arrived at different conclusions on Mount Palomar near San Diego, below Arecibo, Puerto Rico, in the Andes of Chile, and on Kitt Peak in Arizona. The remaining astronomers withheld conclusions until all the data was recorded, a process a few hoped would last indefinitely. It was just as well, for even the most ingenious conclusions were rejected when the rays struck and sent a silent explosion of moon rock into the vacuum. With two exceptions, no one dared to think; the phenomenon was simply too horrifying to contemplate and too awesome to inspire anything but a mental numbness.

The first exception was Pete Whittaker, who lived in an exclusive suburb of Miami. An open can of beer nestled between his legs, Pete sat in his backyard and peered through his latest toy—a twenty-thousand-dollar telescope. When he saw the brilliant red and green flash an instant before it struck the moon, he jumped up, spilling his beer all over himself, and exclaimed, "Oh my God! It's an invasion! We're being invaded!" Visions of Wells's Martians and the Japanese Mysterians flooded into his brain, and he fell backward, in a dead faint.

The other exception took this unexpected turn of events much more calmly, though he did have his impetuous moments. This exception was one Dr. Hans Zarkov.

2

Flaming Death

FLASH spent his vacation by himself in a friend's cabin thirty miles from a small Maine town. He visited the town twice a week to buy groceries and to take flying lessons at a country airport. The remainder of his time he spent out of contact with humanity (though he did receive two letters from Phyllis Franklin). He lifted weights. He chopped firewood. He performed isometric exercises. He meditated for at least an hour every morning, sitting in the Zen or lotus position in the middle of the living room, near the red coals in the fireplace. The cabin was equipped with modern conveniences, except for radio and television. Flash spent his considerable spare time reading. His flying instructor saved newspapers for him. His other material included the encyclopedia, James's *Varieties of Religious Experience,* Wilson's *The Outsider* and *Order of Assassins,* works by Jack London and Gunter Grass, and several science-fiction books (including *Rif* and *The Prince of Sleep*). Occasionally he played tapes by Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Jr., and Johnny Cash, and he appreciated the silence of the falling snow and the whiteness resting on the ground and bare branches and the pine needles. Sometimes he imagined all the universe had succumbed to the soft quiet, and he experienced an incomparable peace. Alone, Flash purged himself of the last vestiges of grief for those who had left him (though the emptiness created by their passing could never be filled). Alone, he occupied himself enough to stay in shape and keep from becoming bored. Alone, he did not experience loneliness, for he had discovered spiritual nuances within himself, he had discovered the connection between his life and all other living things. He drank the sensation of each moment until it seemed infinite, yet the time alloted for his vacation passed more quickly than he would have wished.

However, toward the end of his self-imposed isolation, Flash smiled to himself when he realized that a part of him was restless and yearned for the activity of civilization, and training camp. He gave in to this urge when he discovered the only flight from the country airport the day before the start of training camp was scheduled to depart at six-thirty in the morning.

Flash's spiritual awareness did not permit him to relish waking up

at five. He always slept as late as possible. He spent the last night of his vacation in the Dark Harbor Inn.

Since the inn provided the sole restaurant in the community, Flash's only culinary choice that evening was deciding how he wanted his hamburger cooked. As he gave his order, chatting amicably with the waitress about the Super Bowl, he suddenly felt a tenseness in the atmosphere, a tenseness the other occupants of the room did not seem to notice. A tightness gripped his chest; the peace and tranquillity he had attained in the cabin deserted him, leaving him stranded, his spirit adrift in the cosmos. His existence had somehow become meaningless. He examined these sensations for ten minutes. As the waitress walked toward him, carrying a tray upon which rested his hamburger, tomatoes, and scoop of cottage cheese, he happened to see a young lady enter the restaurant, and he understood why his conception of himself had undergone such a radical alteration.

He was experiencing one of those rare periods of premonition when an individual realizes that soon his life will be swept up by turbulent forces, that he will have no control of his future, that the alteration of his life will be irrevocable, blessedly irrevocable.

The turbulent forces were personified in the shape of this young lady.

She wore a sleek red dress with a wide black belt, and Flash realized she would be exhibiting a boyish yet feminine figure if it were not for her stylish white jacket. Her shoulder-length hair, freshly permed if Flash's eye was still good, seemed black until the light struck it in a certain way, exposing its true auburn color. She had white skin that captured his imagination, eyes aggressive and demanding despite her demure carriage, and full red lips which, he was sure, did not require that bright shade of lipstick. She stood at the cash register, doubtlessly asking the clerk if she should choose her seat or be escorted. She smiled sincerely as she thanked the clerk. Holding her white pocketbook in her hand, she swung her right arm in a wide arc, keeping her unburdened left hand in her jacket pocket as she walked to a table which was, unfortunately, at a corner opposite that of Flash.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Gordon?" asked his waitress.

"What? Oh, yes, of course it is."

The waitress smiled stiffly, as if she did not believe him and he had hurt her feelings. How could he explain? What excuse should he make?

"Is there any problem, Mr. Gordon?" asked the thin host in a bass voice.

Flash smiled woodenly. "Not at all. Everything's fine. I just, uh,

spaced out, that's all." He nodded at the waitress, but gestured for the host to come closer. The thin man approached, after a fashion; though he did not step up to the table, he did lean over until he practically reached a seventy-five-degree angle, thus demonstrating to those few watching and those fewer who cared that he was engaging in a most private conversation with an important guest. "Who is that beautiful young lady sitting over there? No, not her, the one in the white jacket who looks like a model." *With my luck, she'll be one of those nude models for those cheap English newspapers.*

"I believe her name is Dale Arden, sir. She is a travel agent."

"Thanks."

Flash ate only half his hamburger; he nibbled at his tomatoes and he could not bear to look at his cottage cheese. He drank six cups of coffee. He tried not to be obvious about it (but he failed miserably) as he studied her and attempted to read hidden meanings in every nuance of her fluid movements. He was dazzled as much with the image of her as the reality, and she conjured in his mind visions of a woman who, though she perhaps knew her way around, was saving a special part of her heart for an ideal mate who would be her true love. Flash's fantasies about her embarrassed him, though he feared he would be the only person who would ever know them; he had not felt so suddenly attracted to a woman (and with so little reason) since he graduated from high school. His heart pounded, his every movement seemed like a figment of his imagination, each thought was a message from a past he could not recall. His head swirled, his fingers trembled as he reached for his coffee. There was no doubt about it.

Flash Gordon had been struck by the thunderbolt.

In his hotel room, Flash switched on the television to watch the shifting colors and to hear its steady, shrill drone. He had no idea what program was on. She would not leave his thoughts; he imagined himself carrying on trivial yet meaningful conversations with her; he envisioned her playing an important part in every facet of his life; she embraced him, kissed him, pressed her boyishly feminine figure close against the hard muscles of his broad chest . . .

Dale Arden. All-American Girl. He lay on the bed with his hands beneath his head; he stared at the ceiling, already bored of the mindless activity on the tube. He probably would never see her again, though she would occupy his thoughts until she almost became an obsession. No one at the training camp would know the emotions and the utter sense of defeat weighing down upon him. Soon, perhaps as quickly as two days, perhaps as long as two weeks, he would forget

her; he would come to his senses or see Phyllis on the weekends or he would transfer his desire to another woman. But that woman would never affect him as deeply as this Dale Arden, he thought, closing his eyes and drifting to sleep despite the drone of the television. Twenty years from now, when he thought of this Dale, *if* he remembered her, she would merely be the regret of a middle-aged man, a possibility that had never materialized, an ideal shattered by grim realities.

Finally he slept, his heart smothered by a frigid blackness and his mind filled with anxieties for his future. When he woke, nearly thirty minutes later than he had planned, he found he had tossed and turned the entire night, kicking the blankets onto the floor. Cursing because he had hoped for a large breakfast to see him through the day (he avoided food served on airplanes and at airports), he took a quick shower and dressed in white jeans and his "Flash" T-shirt. He loaded his two suitcases into the station wagon he had rented for the duration of his vacation. Since he had settled his hotel bill the night before and had made arrangements to leave the rented car at the airport, his oversleeping had merely inconvenienced him; it would not cause him to miss his flight.

He drove fast over the winding roads bordered by shrubbery and trees. He turned on the radio and listened to a rock song, a hymn of a lover to his woman, informing her that just a little of her love was enough. Her love was so incredible, her body was so edible, she gave him an overdose of love. Flash identified heavily with the singer, though he had never experienced the woman he loved. He was afraid that if he ever saw her again, he would not possess the courage to speak to her. *Ah, she's probably married with three kids and two lovers on the sly,* he thought, rolling down the window in the hopes that the cool, brisk air would help him concentrate more on his driving.

The fresh air did not help. He arrived at the airport sooner than he had expected because he had driven there automatically, his mind transported to realms of passion and sensation by the rock music.

Usually when he was up and about early in the morning, he looked to the clouds and felt his spirit soar into the blue depths. However, today he failed to notice the bright red streaks occasionally sweeping across the sky before burning out or falling from sight. One streak stabbed through a flock of birds migrating from the south, scattering them in all directions, setting a single unfortunate bird aflame.

Flash pulled into the parking spaces before the landing strip. The airport was so small that the strip was not fenced off; there were no problems with crowd control. The main task of the two-engine plane sitting on the strip was to deliver the mail now being loaded into the storage compartments. Realizing there was really no point in entering

the plane until all the mail was loaded, Flash read a newspaper he had left beside him on the seat. It was a week old, but his mind was wandering anyway. The thought of beginning training camp actually filled him with dread. *Maybe I'll retire after this year. Become an actor before my nose gets broken.*

He was actually becoming immersed in an article he had not previously noticed, something about the economic index's correlation to reality, when pellets suddenly struck the station wagon, making a dull sound on the windshields and a rattling noise on the hood and roof.

It's hailing, he thought with some surprise, since, save for a white cloud on the horizon, the sky was clear. A chill ran through him, but it did not originate at his spine; the temperature had actually dropped for five seconds. Hearing a hissing, he looked out the window and saw a small, red-hot cinder fizzling in a puddle. He looked straight ahead, then at the pellet again. It was now black, charred, and cool.

Naw. Must be my imagination.

He lifted up the paper, but before he could read a word, a chauffeured van pulled up on the left of the station wagon. On the side of the van was inscribed DARK HARBOR INN; below the inscription, was a replica of the Frazetta painting of an undersea monster towering above a skindiver. *I saw that movie,* thought Flash absently, remembering *The Creature from the Black Lagoon.*

Then Flash recognized the silhouette through the tinted glass of the passenger's window. He would recognize the shape of that freshly permed hair anywhere. His heart threatened to crack his sternum, the blood vessels between his skin and skull expanded practically to the point of bursting; he wondered if he could count on them; he felt a glow of hope and the fear of rejection and disappointment; he threw the newspaper down on the black mat on the passenger's side; he scrambled to pick up his luggage and open the door simultaneously; he controlled himself with an effort.

Okay, Flash, it's time to be suave and debonair.

The driver opened the door for Dale; when she stepped out, she glanced at Flash for a moment.

Did she notice me? Looking in the rearview mirror, he straightened his short blond hair with his hands before getting out of the wagon. Pretending to be oblivious to the world, he walked around the front and pulled his baggage from the passenger side. Though his lips were puckered, his mouth was dry and so he did not try to whistle. It was just as well, because he could not carry a tune for longer than ten seconds. Flash had been smitten by unreality. He was as shy and as

anxious as a virgin youth. Walking five yards behind her, pretending (only for his own benefit) to be totally uninterested in her, he memorized the swaying of her hips, imagining the skin of her thighs and backside ebbing and flowing with the rhythm of her steps. He imagined other sights, as well as odors. She still wore the white jacket and the red dress, but the clothing seemed fresh, as if it had just been taken from the closet.

The chauffeur carried her suitcases to the passengers' area; Flash wished he could have done so himself, though he would have looked silly struggling with the bulk of her luggage and his. When Dale thanked and tipped the chauffeur, Flash felt a surge of jealousy for no good reason. He concentrated on strapping his suitcase in the compartment above his seat. The chauffeur left. Flash sat down, fastening his seat belt and crossing his legs. He felt somewhat relieved, thankful there were no other passengers, though his awkwardness at being alone with her caused a constriction in his throat that threatened to choke him.

Clearing his throat, he looked at her and smiled.

She nodded, finally acknowledging his existence, and returned his smile.

Flash wondered what had happened to the worldly professional quarterback who, once he determined he could have a meaningful, spiritual, no-strings-attached relationship with a woman whose mind he admired, proceeded with assurance, wit, and style? Or had that Flash Gordon ever existed? Was that merely a role to be assumed when the circumstances warranted it? Flash grimaced, only to smile again. He was beginning to feel like a fool. When Dale spoke (with a voice that intensified his fantasies), he was totally unprepared.

"Where did you get that stupid T-shirt?" she asked.

If I tell her it was a gift from an admirer, she'll get the wrong idea. "Well, uh, it's like this, you see . . ."

"Are you from California? You talk like you are."

Flash was stunned. Woman of his dreams or not, he wasn't going to take any of this smart talk. "See here, young lady . . ." He paused; his mind was momentarily blank. "You must be a New York girl."

Dale was surprised. "How did you know?"

"Your manners."

Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, Dale placed a tiny fist on her hip and pointed at Flash with her right forefinger. Her reply, though it might have been memorable, was destined never to be; for at that moment, the pilot and copilot stepped into the plane. Dale turned away from

Flash, totally ignoring him, and smiled sweetly at them.

The pilot tipped his hat at the passengers. The copilot said, “Morning, miss. A pleasure to have you, Mr. Gordon. I’ve been a fan of yours ever since you broke the passing record for the Sugar Bowl.” He reached out and shook Flash’s hand. “As a sophomore yet. Amazing!”

“It was nothing. Only a game,” said Flash, feeling pleasure not at the copilot’s compliments but at the curiosity plainly apparent in Dale’s quizzical expression.

“But what a game!” exclaimed the copilot, releasing Flash’s hand and straightening. After giving them the flight instructions and safety procedures, he said, “We should be taking off in a few minutes, so remain seated until then. And have a good flight.”

“I’m sure we will,” said Flash as the copilot disappeared behind the blue curtains, into the cockpit.

The couple sat in awkward silence; Flash felt the animosity flowing from the young woman. Resting her chin on her fist, she stared out the square window, at the hills beyond the airport. Once she leaned forward, raising her shoulders, looking in all directions as much as the porthole permitted; but her unvoiced questions were unanswerable, or else her eyes had played tricks on her, for she slumped back and reassumed her lifeless pose.

The engines were switched on.

“Ahh, listen to those eggbeaters whirl,” said Flash, trying to make conversation.

Dale contorted her face in such a way that he could not tell if she was confused or horrified. “What?”

“The propellers. Propellers are sometimes called egg-beaters.”

“By whom?”

“It’s a slang term that originated during World War Two.”

“Wonderful,” said Dale, nodding blankly, as if she could not understand why anyone believed this information was important enough to impart to her.

Flash felt a tightening in his gut only partially due to the takeoff. Through the thick glass of the porthole he saw the landscape roll past him; it sank below him. Slowly, even the highest mountains in the distance disappeared, and there was only the infinite, comforting blue outside. He wished he could escape there, that he could let his spirit soar; but random factors had come into play. He no longer controlled his destiny, not even a fraction of it.

Through the corner of his eye, he saw Dale’s knuckles turning white as she gripped both the armrests. He sighed. To say they had gotten

off on the wrong foot would be like saying Nero Wolfe the detective was a tad overweight.

Clouds like wisps in a dream grazed the plane. Flash discovered the intellectual delight of unpredictable abstract shapes. He searched for figures and faces in the folds of the pillowy clouds farther away; these clouds were immobile, calm. Then, without warning, the fluffy folds of a gray cloud sucked inward as if they had been struck by a gust of wind originating straight above. But there was no indication of winds elsewhere in the sky.

Before Flash had the opportunity to frame a definition of what had happened, the plane bumped like a jeep traveling too fast over a rocky road. The bumping lasted for fifteen seconds; then the plane flew smoothly again.

Dale tightened her fist and bit white knuckles. Her face was as pale as a mannequin's. Flash wished he could comfort her.

Again, the plane jolted, this time much harder and for much longer.

Leaning against one wall with his palm along the way, Flash moved into the cockpit. "Any problem, fellas?"

The pilot said, "Bit of clear air-turbulence. Nothing serious."

The copilot added, "But nothing you'd want to toss a third-down pass through either." Keeping one hand firm upon the wheel, he reached into a briefcase and pulled out a copy of *People* with a picture of Flash on the cover. "When I heard you were going to be a passenger, I borrowed this from my son's memorabilia collection. I'd like for you to autograph it for him, if you would, Mr. Gordon."

Flash took the magazine and a pen from the copilot. "Glad to. What's his name?"

"Buzz."

As Flash hastily scribbled his name on the cover, the plane was jolted by the hardest burst yet. For a moment it seemed like the plane had flown through a wall.

"Wow! Call Boston approach and see what they've got," said the pilot to the copilot. And to Flash: "Seat belt time sir."

The plane lurched as Flash quickly moved toward his seat. On the way he turned to the pilots and shouted, "Maybe it'd be smoother higher up!"

"Would you do us a favor?" asked Dale.

Flash hesitated before sitting. He raised his eyebrows. *Anything!* he thought.

"Leave them alone. They're busy driving the plane!"

For once he could not argue with her. He held onto the shelf above her seat. “Just some turbulence. We’ll be through it in a minute. Nothing to worry about, really.” He paused. “By the way, my name’s Flash. Flash Gordon.”

“I deduced that.” Suddenly the glassy hardness disappeared from her eyes and she looked at Flash with some of the humanity she had exhibited last night. “Will you forgive me? I’m always rude when I’m scared. I didn’t mean to call your T-shirt stupid.”

“It’s just an amusing affectation.” *I think she’ll buy that.* “It’s kind of nice. I mean a travel agent who’s scared in airplanes.” He felt very embarrassed as he read the surprise in her expression. “I saw you at the hotel last night. I asked the host who you were.”

She laughed. “Oh, he’s such a busybody. I bet he gets the inside scoop on everyone who stays there.”

The plane lurched so violently that Flash would have fallen if he had not been holding tightly onto the shelf. He sat beside her and fastened his seat belt. The plane jolted again, as if a hand from the sky had whacked it. Dale became white, bit her lower lip, swallowed hard, and grabbed Flash’s hand. “Talk to me; get my mind off this!”

“I couldn’t believe a girl like you was alone.”

“You’re just saying that to get my mind off this.”

Flash smiled and shrugged. “I mean it. What were you doing there alone?” His concentration was completely arrested by her; he saw or heard nothing else. He perceived—vaguely—the plane jolting, but he thought nothing of it. After all, the pilots were driving; they should do the worrying.

Though Dale was looking at Flash, for a moment it seemed she saw another. “My boyfriend ditched me a few months back. Or rather, I ditched him, but he made it impossible for us to continue being an item.”

“He must have been an insensitive lout.”

She smiled wryly. “Actually, he was very considerate, but . . .” She looked to her hands in her lap. “The reason we broke up is very embarrassing.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“Well, I should start talking about it sometime if I want to face it and deal with it, and now’s just as good a time as any.”

“Go on,” said Flash, unable to conceal his eagerness, desperate to know what circumstances and coincidences had enabled him to meet this wonderful woman.

“My boyfriend, you see, has these *needs,* needs I tried to satisfy but

which I couldn't deal with indefinitely." Waving at the air with one hand, she covered her eyes with the other. "It was just that after a while I couldn't function sexually in all those exotic bars, around all those *people,* doing all those strange and wonderful *things* with all sorts of people who were perfect *strangers."* She sighed. "I guess I was just too old-fashioned for him." Then, to Flash's utter shock, she blushed and grinned. "Some of it was nice though. I might have been able to handle it on a part-time basis. Anyway, after we broke up, I felt I should clean up my act. So I stayed at the Dark Harbor Inn for a few weeks, reading mysteries and watching reruns. And I found a few nice country boys to help me pass the time."

I guess the All-American Girl is a little more sophisticated than she used to be, thought Flash.

"You understand, don't you?" asked Dale.

"Uh, sure I do," replied Flash. "What's the farthest away place you know?"

"As in far away?"

"From everything. I'll let you sell me a ticket there."

Suddenly, the plane jolted so hard it seemed as if it had been momentarily stopped cold by powerful forces. Biting her lower lip, Dale dug her fingernails into Flash's palm. She cut his skin, but Flash's only response was to hold her hand more tightly.

"Honestly, it's nothing," he said.

"Famous last words."

"I'm taking flying lessons. Sometimes the air rises under clouds and you get a little . . ." Flash stared out the porthole.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Dale, too, looked through the porthole. She brought her hands to her mouth and uttered a whimpering cry.

Billowing waves of pitch blackness rolled across the sky. The sun was an orb of red fire impotently blazing in the darkness.

Flash did not know what to think of this. He was a civilized, rational man suddenly viewing the unknown. Sweat poured from his face and armpits and chest; he breathed with difficulty. Though the blackness was covering the sky in a matter of seconds, the process seemed to take hours, and Flash felt somewhat like a primitive faced with the ineffable.

A black disk slowly, remorselessly, crept over the sun.

Interlude

THE populace of the northeastern United States could not help but notice that the eclipse and the accompanying special effects contradicted all the known scientific laws of the universe, as well as a few mystical ones, but the more astute among them realized instantly that tremendous inconsistencies were woven into the fabric of life, and there was no reason to assume the fabric of the universe was any different.

Each individual reacted to the visuals in an individual way. However, it is unnecessary to delineate the reaction of each person who happened to be in New England at the time; a few representative examples will suffice.

Fernando Martinez, for instance, a dishwasher in Boston, was leaning against the brick wall outside the restaurant where he was currently employed, smoking a Winston, drinking beer, and chatting with friends about the busty charms of the new waitress, when he became aware of the shadows smothering the sky. Deeply religious impulses, which he had successfully repressed for years, surged to the fore of his consciousness, and he became certain Judgment Day had arrived. A quick check of his memory revealed many disgusting and perverted sins, and the check only accounted for his deeds of the past week. Convinced he would be sentenced to Hell, his body was unable to withstand the emotional strain and Fernando died of a heart attack on the spot.

Most reactions were not so extreme.

Ruth and Biff, two romantically involved teens, were enjoying themselves magnificently in the woods when they were interrupted by the eclipse. An awestruck Biff became distracted, thus setting the stage for an argument wherein each party, with some justification, accused the other of being unromantic.

Tommy Two-Hawks, an American-Indian high-rise construction worker, paused twenty-nine stories above the streets of a Connecticut city and discovered glorious heights within himself that only his ancestors had known. Micky Martin, who averaged fifteen comic book stories a month, flicked on the electric lights and jotted down four brief plots. Rita Belmont put aside her housework for the rest of the day, celebrating the eclipse because she felt like it. Jory Phillips, who did not allow an opportunity to pass him by when it concerned the

game of marbles on the playground, selected a few choice cat's-eyes while his playmates watched the skies.

Many a talk-show host and weather forecaster made tentative, reasonable explanations for the phenomena, but none came, as close as Griswold F. Grubb, retired fisherman, who sat outside the general store of Pitched Forks, Maine, and said, "Ask dat Zarkov fella what's goin' on. Bet he knows. 'Fact, wouldn' be 'prized if he wasn' 'sponsible."

3

Blast Off!

THE personal history of Dr. Hans Zarkov was not so different from that of many of his ethnic origin and generation, save that he had survived. His mother had managed to have Hans smuggled into England before the Holocaust had begun in earnest. His father was gassed after being held prisoner for several years; his mother survived —after a fashion. While in the camps, she forgot the person she had been, forgot that once she had had a husband and a child. Zarkov searched five years for her after the war. When he found her, he realized she would never again be the laughing, considerate, iron-willed woman of his early childhood. She was silent, sulking, toothless, her hair prematurely gray and her face creased and haggard; she was a seamstress in a huge dry-cleaning establishment, doing the same work she had been forced to do in the camps. Her remembrances of her son were vague. Zarkov was truly alone. After he emigrated to America, he occasionally sent her money, though he knew she would not understand why (or who had sent it, for that matter). She never acknowledged it, she never wrote him a note, and Zarkov did not learn of her death until six months after she had been buried in a nameless grave.

Perhaps as a reaction to her passing, Zarkov plunged himself into the world of the intellect. He had intended to be a patent lawyer, but he soon realized that the work, though profitable, would be too boring for a man of his mental stature. He studied the sciences. While his fellow graduate students were doing the twist and other frivolous dances, Zarkov was sitting in his dorm room formulating the groundwork for theories and experiments which would ultimately lead to mankind's understanding of the neutrino. Almost as an afterthought, he proved via mathematics that it was theoretically possible for an entire universe to be enclosed in an electron. His paper on subatomic worlds became a sensation, and he was immediately compared to da Vinci and Einstein. "Pish and tosh," replied Zarkov when informed of the comparison. "They are mere theorists, dreamers with their heads constantly in the clouds. I make my thoughts reality. If I cannot make it real, then it does not exist and it might as well be consigned to the work of a science-fiction writer."

To prove his point, Zarkov began work on an interdimensional field ray which would permit man to peer directly into the fourth dimension. The project was a controversial one, to say the least, especially since Zarkov demanded a million dollars in funding at the onset.

Now, the first thing people noticed about this remarkable young scientist was that he lacked the personal touch; he could infuriate a man at fifty yards and a woman at twenty-five. His effect upon his peers was much more powerful; he infuriated them with his mere ideas. So when the experimental model of Zarkov's invention exploded, sending chunks of the building housing it all over campus, miraculously injuring only three people, it came as a surprise to no one that Zarkov failed to rally enough support behind him to continue. In fact, since one chunk had landed squarely in the university dean's begonia garden, it surprised no one that Zarkov was soon searching for gainful employment.

The Pentagon was interested in hiring him, naturally enough. But though Zarkov was developing the singlemindedness and indefatigable spirit which would eventually cause three wives to leave him due to his neglect of them in favor of science, he did not totally perceive the world in terms of equations and fundings. He remembered war and what war did to people. If pressed, he admitted in an unsentimental fashion that his goal was to make life better for mankind. He was a man of ideals. Consequently, and in no uncertain terms, he refused the Pentagon's offer to invent weapons. In fact, his terms were so blunt that the Department of Immigration threatened to deport him. The Department was very insistent until Zarkov informed it (via *The New York Times*) that he had been a United States Citizen since his twenty-seventh birthday.

However, Zarkov had no objections to being a civilian employed by NASA. The lure of the infinite void of space was so great that he, like many other noted scientists, pretended the only possible results of the space program would be peaceful and, hence, beneficial for all mankind. He used the race with the Russians as a lever to secure funding for pet projects. In reality, he did not care if the first man to set foot on the moon was an American, a Russian, or an Armenian midget. Ideologies and nationalities did not separate mankind into different species.

The brilliant, dynamic, irascible scientist soon became a legendary figure, famous at Cape Kennedy, the stuff of fairy tales in civil and military offices throughout the remainder of the nation. He did not deign to waste his considerable wit when he wished to put a bureaucrat or a paranoid general in his proper place. Zarkov merely

stared at the offender and rubbed his thick black beard and scowled like a Victorian teacher opening a closet door to discover a pervert having his way with her prepubescent charge. Few men resisted this stare. No man dared to transfer Zarkov to another department or to challenge his ideals. Zarkov spared neither the high nor the low effects of his fiery temper; many a beaker had been hurled in his laboratory. Fortunately his aim was most frequently likened to that of Wrong Way Corrigan.

Once, legend had it, President Johnson, while touring the Cape, disregarded the cautious words of his sycophants and dropped into Zarkov's office unannounced. Evidently the President had expected Zarkov to be pleasant and subservient. He exited in five minutes, stunned and shocked, his hound-dog ears blistering from the obscenities and vilifications heaped upon him for perpetuating the war in Vietnam. A general who attempted to defend the President by calling Zarkov a Communist was in turn denounced as "a thick-skulled baboon utterly lacking in decency and respect for the higher ideals of mankind, little better than a charter member of the KKK and certainly no smarter than one."

No wonder then that when the space program lost its impetus Zarkov was one of the first scientists to be laid off. Due to a computer error, he did not receive his first unemployment check for over a year, but he was only interested in collecting it as a matter of principle. He was not particularly enamored with an economic system which, in the future, would result in greater hardships for politicians to remedy. Politicians were humanitarians only during election years anyway. Zarkov was far more concerned about the inklings of greater insights into the working of the universe, inklings which he had only begun to perceive in the vaguest sense of the word during his tenure at NASA. These inklings in addition to his temper and his impatience with the meanderings of small minds, were enough to damage his scientific reputation.

Zarkov did not know when he first arrived at these insights. Perhaps the inherent philosophical implications were inexorably woven with the tumultuous events of his painful youth. Perhaps he had merely perceived them in a dream. Whatever the cause, whatever the origin, Zarkov became fond of proclaiming that the greatest religions of the world were unprepared to fathom the true nature of the universe. However mankind visualized the ultimate creator, it was doomed to be incorrect; for could a grain of dust visualize a painting by Titian? ("How about a drawing by Frank Paul?" asked an assistant, who was immediately fired.) Zarkov became convinced that mankind was too puny and frail to conquer the universe, indeed, that perhaps mankind

should conceal itself on Earth in the hopes the universe would not notice it was there. For Zarkov had sensed malign forces in the infinite scope that were completely indifferent to mankind's fate. Many a night he wandered about on the estate he had inherited from a distant relative, staring at the beautiful stars in the clear black sky, and he felt the vastness of the universe bear down on him like a tremendous weight. Even as his spirit soared, it was sucked into the black hole of despair.

The melancholia inherent in the gloomy estate fully matched that in Zarkov's breast, forcing him to escape into the meaningless problem-solving of his inventions. His relative had had a mania for tropical gardening, an expensive hobby for a New Englander. Consequently the living quarters and the labs were bordered on both sides by greenhouses, and above was a third greenhouse in the form of a tower. Zarkov had given no thought to what it would be like to live in such a building when he had helped his relative design it; never had he thought he would inherit it and have no other place to go.

Despite the pleasant greenery (Zarkov grew most of his vegetables beneath the glass whose properties were enhanced by solar batteries), there was a certain sterility to the estate which was not conducive to relaxation. Zarkov never felt he was at home; he felt, instead, that he had been marooned in a temporary resting spot which had suddenly, inexplicably become permanent, like the characters in those surreal speculative fiction stories who found themselves stranded in airplanes that would never land, or in buses that would never reach their destinations. He and his assistant, Munson (an undependable sort but the best help he could get), slept on cots. For breakfast they fixed cold cuts and lettuce and tomato and mayo on white bread; and for supper they served vegetables and frozen foods in arbitrary combinations. One particularly melancholy evening, perhaps the lowest point of Zarkov's life since the war, they ate fresh cauliflower with Kraft's Pasteurized Cheese Spread and a special brand of frozen lasagne laced with preservatives. Munson loved it. They washed their laundry in a machine which, for all the good it did them, was little better than beating their clothing on rocks. They hung the laundry to dry on lines in a section of the greenhouse where Zarkov, with his black thumb, could never get anything to grow. Huge brown wads of dust defaced every corner and hid beneath every chair. The trash from Munson's occasional forays to fast food restaurants overflowed from the big tan plastic container next to the washing machine. There was no space for pictures on the walls, for Zarkov's equipment and inventions precluded any reasonable attempt at interior decorating. The ruins of a television set rusted in the backyard. (Zarkov had thrown it outside after his profile on "Sixty Minutes.") The only entertainment was

provided by the cassettes of rock-and-roll music sent by a friendly corporation executive whose firm manufactured the few inventions Zarkov had patented.

Often Zarkov roamed the grounds near the greenhouse that was his home, listening to the strains of The Beatles or The Who through the speakers, pondering the eons of evolution which had led to his being, or merely making another of his innumerable observations on the plight of twentieth-century man. Though he had passed his forties, the spiritual barrenness of the universe made him feel as if he had been cast adrift in a teenage wasteland.

Fortunately for Zarkov's sanity, he managed to preoccupy himself sufficiently with scientific problems, otherwise he might have been ensnarled in the psychic spiral that frequently sends social outsiders into the bottomless depths of hopelessness. The belief that life is futile often leads to days of neutrality where nothing is gained and everything is lost. Zarkov clung to the notion that only actions and deeds provide life with meaning. And every morning as he stumbled out of his cot, divested himself of his white gown and sleeping cap, and peered into the bathroom mirror, studying those bloodshot eyes and inspecting the pillow traces above the black beard, he wondered how such a magnificent brain could be housed in such a puny skull, how such an exhausted spirit could overcome an existence that fairly radiated despair to toil without hope of reward for mankind's ultimate salvation. For Zarkov's common sense had convinced him time and time again that sooner or later the universe would notice mankind, and that somebody had better be prepared. Nearly every night Zarkov sensed the ineffable cosmic forces girding for a frontal assault, and so he devoted his days to measuring the might of the forces which conceivably would one day attack. In his idealistic heart he prayed to whatever benign forces there were that peaceful resistance, at most, would be called for.

The revenues from his patents permitted him to devise mechanical concoctions that modern industrial executives would have broken many antitrust laws to secure. Zarkov invented a sine curve frequency modulator which transmitted waves to measure the expended energy of novas. From the materials of common gravel he created an alloy which did not contract when cooled. Using devices of inordinate sensitivity, augmented by a computer of almost independent intelligence (the size of a writing desk), he discovered a closed section of the galaxy where the heat would not spontaneously flow to the coldest regions; however, he was unable to extrapolate a theory to explain this, and he had no choice but to conclude that energies beyond his ken, perhaps artificial energies created by an alien

intelligence, were responsible for the perplexing enigma. After months of arduous (and seemingly futile) effort, he created a vibratory force field which negated, somewhat, the effects of gravity waves. The force field, incidently, radiated four hitherto unknown primary colors; even the cynical and dense Munson was overcome by the simple beauty of this discovery. Zarkov estimated the density of the ether to a nanofraction, detected electric currents transmitted through the said ether that originated in other galaxies, discovered a star formed entirely of molten zinc, a quasar whose energy was mysteriously diminishing, a gigantic comet hurling itself between the galaxies, and innumerable indications of intelligent life—such as a planet exploding for no discernible reason. Yes, Zarkov's astronomical instruments were of such sensitivity that he had actually pinpointed the location of over fifty planets; he possessed fragments of information about some. But not even his high idealism could convince him that mankind was emotionally and intellectually prepared for the fruits of his genius, even his relatively benign fruits. That is why he designed many weapons to protect mankind from the dangers of the unfeeling and uncaring universe, but why he never brought himself to build them. Thanks to "Sixty Minutes" and his own iconoclasm, he was left alone, but if those dodo-heads at the Pentagon ever learned of the blueprints in his safe . . .

However, when the peculiar energies began manifesting themselves between Jupiter and Mars, Dr. Hans Zarkov wished many a time that he had confided in those same dodo-heads.

The cinder fell in an arc above the gloomy estate; it crashed through the greenhouse glass as if that had been its intention, and it landed between the legs of the sleeping man sprawled beneath the brown blankets on the cot. A column of thick, odorous smoke arose from the blankets.

Munson awoke. He sniffed something in the air. *Smells like a decaying skunk,* he thought, recalling an incident from his childhood when he had tried to bury one in the backyard. Then Munson's short red hair stood on end; his eyes bulged until they protruded nearly as much as his fat red cheeks. Throwing the blanket from the cot, he slipped into his shoes (he was otherwise fully clothed) and stamped the cinder into harmless ashes. Only when the immediate danger was taken care of did he notice the blackness above. There was not a star in the sky, emphasizing the unholy nature of the darkness. He steadied himself by leaning against a console. "Dr. Zarkov! The sun!"

The doctor was caught in the throes of a nightmare. He dreamed he was in the upper bedroom of the white two-story house of his

childhood; he walked through the hall and down the stairs and through another hall as if he were a wraith, gliding past the antique furniture and portraits of his great-grandparents, until he reached the window through which he saw what in his childlike eyes was the great expanse of the backyard; over fifty yards away stood the stoic tall evergreens he loved so much to climb. Much nearer was the alien who had come for him. It was a gigantic orange creature with yellow spots, long skinny legs, longer skinnier arms, a single round eye in the center of its massive stomach, and a tubular sucking organ instead of a neck and head. It ran toward the child Zarkov. Relentlessly. Ruthlessly. The sucking organ broke through the glass with a numbing crash and struck! It completely covered the child Zarkov's head, smothering him in blackness. Then . . .

"Dr. Zarkov! It's eight twenty-four and there's no sun!"

Zarkov thought, *My God, I'm thrust from one nightmare directly into another.* Then the guilt feelings flooded back to him, threatening to drown him in a despair much greater than that he had experienced in his dream, when the sucking organ had covered his head. He staggered at the realization that he had not adequately protected mankind. He was wide awake. Like Munson, he had collapsed fully clothed onto his cot early in the morning. So he leaped from the cot wearing a wrinkled white shirt and tan corduroys. His mouth felt as though a midget with muddy feet had tramped through it, but he couldn't worry about brushing his teeth now. He had to save the Earth! Reaching the consoles, he pushed buttons and turned knobs and flicked switches. "Check the angular vector of the moon!"

The first thing Munson checked was his heartbeat; numbed by an adrenaline rush, he did not know what to do first. Zarkov, as usual, had given him such vague instructions that several valid courses of actions were possible, not to mention the invalid ones. Running his stubby fingers through his red hair, wondering if he would ever get the chance to shampoo it, Munson dashed to another console and pushed buttons and turned knobs and flicked switches. "I know it's against orders," he said, "but I'm going to intercept some television frequencies so I can find out what's on the news."

Zarkov nodded. "Any source of information is acceptable under the circumstances."

La di da, thought Munson as he turned a knob and stared at a screen above him. First he intercepted a quiz show, then a Lucille Ball rerun, then an episode of "Tarzan" starring Ron Ely. When he intercepted a picture of Brad Cassidy, TV newsman, speaking into a microphone, Munson breathed a sigh of relief.

"According to scientists at NASA," said Cassidy over the airwaves,

“this unpredicted solar eclipse is no cause for alarm. They have been in conference with the President, however, since seven o’clock this morning, briefing him on . . .”

Snarling, grunting his displeasure, Zarkov killed the sound.

“What did you do that for?” whined Munson, fiddling with the knobs to restore the sound.

“The President is a peanut brain,” said Zarkov. “I swear, ever since Ford allowed reporters to take pictures of him buttering his breakfast muffins on the wrong side . . . Well, it’s been very bad for the country, I can tell you that.”

Right, thought Munson. *Perfectly clear as usual.* His dissatisfaction with his employer was overwhelmed by his concern when a ticker tape clicked from the console next to that controlling the screen. Holding his breath, Munson gingerly tore it from the slot. He read it several times. He stuttered something incomprehensible after each reading. He swayed, stricken with an attack of gas. He felt the blood draining from his face.

“What did you find? The moon out of orbit?”

“You could say that,” replied Munson when he could manage it. “By more than twelve degrees! This must be a mistake! I told you we should rig new transistors and overhaul this thing.” He whacked the console briskly.

“It’s not a mistake,” said Zarkov grimly. “It’s an attack. I’ve been right, all these years. Fire up those transducers, will you?”

I’ll fire up those transducers, thought Munson. *I’ll fire them right up your* . . . However, his desire to restore the sound caused him to leave the thought incomplete. Nearly hyperventilating, he attempted to calm himself as he worked the controls on the console, hoping to override Zarkov’s override. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the familiar jowls of the President crystallize with only a slight interference. “The President’s coming on. I think he’s making a statement.”

“What the hell do I care?” asked Zarkov. “I tried to warn him. He wouldn’t listen. A poor man’s Hindenburg, looking for his Hitler.”

The blackness outside was briefly illuminated by red waves exposing a torrent of small meteors. The cinders crashed into trees, knocking over three and setting four afire.

Though his body meant it as a gasp, Munson wheezed horribly, like a coronary victim suddenly stricken with asthma.

“Merely fragments of moon rock,” said Zarkov in tones as comforting as he could make them. “Our moon is being subjected to

some enormous force from outer space—a kind of energy beam."

Now red lightning bolts stabbed across the sky. Their jagged fingers touched points throughout the landscape. Glass, shattered noisily, pieces dropping about the harried scientists. Munson hastily covered his face with his hands, but Zarkov calmly continued his tasks at the console. The lights flickered, the screen faded; Zarkov did not notice as he read a printout. He sighed, but there was a glimmer of suppressed excitement in his voice as he said, "Time for us to go, Munson."

"Go where?"

Zarkov clenched the hand holding the printout into a fist. The veins of his neck protruded and his jaw was set so tightly that Munson expected to see bits of enamel fall from his mouth. "I've got the coordinates now—the direction of the energy beam's source. This is what we've been waiting for. We'll go up and counterattack them!"

Munson gulped loudly. He slowly turned to stare at the ornate golden space capsule looming above the foliage in the greenhouse behind him. "Surely you jest!"

"No."

"You're crazy! I'm not going up in that!"

Nodding as if he had expected this reaction all along, Zarkov opened a drawer and pulled out a revolver.

"Doctor! I thought you were a man of peace!" exclaimed Munson.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. I can't handle the capsule alone. Get your toothbrush, Munson; you're going on a trip to the stars!"

* * *

The small plane carrying Flash Gordon and Dale Arden flew blindly in the impenetrable darkness. The pilot wondered if they had somehow flown into a spacious cave, and he unconsciously tensed for an impact into unyielding rock that would arrive without warning, at any second. The copilot, though just as nervous as his companion, wondered if they had somehow flown into a tremendous womb; if only it wasn't so cold . . . However, they spoke to one another with professional aplomb, as if nothing unusual was happening, as if they navigated absolute darkness every day.

"What's the word from Boston, Bill?" asked the pilot.

The copilot frowned and shook his head. "Zip. Zilch. Zero. All channels dead." For the first time he permitted traces of amazement to creep into his voice. "Say, get a load of those VORs . . ."

The needles on virtually every instrument of the controls spun crazily, registering impossible and contradictory information that altered just as crazily and just as impossibly with each passing second.

Suddenly, the pilot exclaimed, “On the left, about nine o’clock high!”

The darkness parted, wounded by a warm glow of red, as if some mad and powerful painter had cast his watercolors into the sky. Terrible, terrific bolts of red lightning stabbed from the warm glow, reaching toward the ground below like a murderer’s knife. The atmosphere itself seemed to react against this alien lightning with an electricity of its own, hoping to reject it or consume it like a gaseous antibody. A streak of lightning barely missed the nose of the plane; it disintegrated an instant before the nose would have struck it.

Now the pilot permitted himself to express a hint of panic and fear. “Hold on tight, Bill, let’s put this baby down right here.”

The moment the copilot touched the flap control, painful electricity coursed through him, and his vision was blinded by a crimson wave. The copilot was vaguely aware of the pilot grabbing his arm, of the pilot experiencing a similiar pain, but those were the last impressions of his life.

The unconscious bodies of the pilot and copilot were sucked through the broken glass as if their seat belts were nonexistent, sucked into the cold, foreboding blackness.

In the passenger section, Flash and Dale had spent the time sitting quietly, pondering the limbo into which they had been thrust. Frustrated that he could do nothing constructive in this predicament, Flash concentrated upon having a steadying, calming influence on Dale, who was finding the situation much more difficult to cope with. The peace Flash summoned in times of need could not relieve him of his anxieties. He had the premonition that the lessons of the past would be of no help in the coming hours, that each risky deed would be performed without full knowledge of the consequences.

The cockpit curtains flapped. Without thinking, Flash unsnapped his seat belt and rushed toward the cockpit, only to find himself fighting a gale. His stomach tightened as if he had swallowed a concrete slab.

When Flash saw that the pilots were gone, he was thankful that at the least he could spend his final moments battling the inevitable. Sliding into a seat, he grabbed the bucking wheel yoke, pulling it back with all his strength. He kicked at the rubber pedals. He could not allow himself to be distracted long enough to see Dale’s face as she entered the cockpit, undoubtedly struggling against the gale, and said, “My God! Where did the pilots go?”

Setting his jaw, his heart fearful over Dale's fate, Flash said between his teeth, "Hydraulic's gone. Grab that other wheel, help me pull her up!"

Staggering into the other seat, Dale tugged at the wheel. She was paralyzed by despair when she realized that her efforts had been in vain. Tensing every muscle, she pulled at it again, draining her mind of every irrelevant thought. When it seemed her efforts had been met with some small success, she said, "Are we coming up? I can't see a thing!"

"Me neither. Look for the landing lights!"

Dale glanced about what remained of the cockpit. The controls and instrument panels were totally incomprehensible. "This isn't my scene! Look where?"

Though it was risky, Flash released one hand from the wheel and pointed at the controls above Dale. "Switches up there; start hitting them!"

Dale instantly complied. She remembered a comic short she had seen as a child; the three comedians, stranded in a crashing rocket ship, did the only thing they could: they pushed buttons and hoped for the best. When the landing lights finally flooded on, Dale was relieved only because she could once again grab the wheel with both hands.

Flash realized they could not keep the plane in the air much longer; it was foolish to try. He began scanning the ground below, searching for an adequate landing site. He glimpsed a strange tower—a greenhouse?—in the center of a gloomy estate.

"Did your flying lessons get as far as landing?" screamed Dale over the roar of the gale.

"I was afraid you'd ask that," replied Flash, smiling despite himself.

Red bolts of jagged electricity shimmered and danced on the nose and wings. The atmosphere howled as if its very atoms were disintegrating into nothingness.

Zarkov's hand trembled as he aimed the revolver at the cowering Munson. His mind full of questions dancing like skeletons in a graveyard, preying upon his sanity, his face remained impassive, his blazing eyes providing the only indications of the irrationality lurking beneath the surface of his personality. "Munson, you'll go down in history as a *putz.*"

Munson folded his arms across his flabby chest and shook his head, his fat cheeks shaking in the dim light. "I don't care. At least I'll be a living *putz.*"

"I swear, Munson, I'll shoot!"

Munson shrugged, his moving hands exhibiting his exasperation. "Get shot or go up in that thing—what's the difference?"

"This way you'll be giving your life to save the Earth! Haven't you any spirit at all?"

As if to answer Zarkov's question, Munson calmly walked away, through the greenhouse, toward the nearest exit.

I knew I should have hired that coed instead, thought Zarkov. *You just can't get good help these days.* "I tell you I can't get off alone. *I need someone!"*

But Munson ignored him. Zarkov swallowed something large and slimy that somehow had been manufactured in his mouth. Munson—the *putz*—had been right about one thing: Zarkov was indeed a man of peace. He nervously drew a bead above Munson's head. Perhaps if he gave his assistant a little haircut, then he would begin to see things in a more reasonable light; he would be glad to sacrifice himself for the good of the billions on Earth. However, Zarkov was reluctant to pull the trigger because he could not keep his arm steady. Just as he began to increase the pressure on the trigger, a horrendous crashing—the impact of metal upon dirt—distracted him. He heard the whirring of propellers, the roar of coughing engines drowning out the crackling lightning and the eternally hissing wind. He glanced about, and was vaguely aware that Munson was walking toward the door as if nothing unusual was transpiring, perceiving bright lights tearing away the darkness, growing larger, approaching with the inevitability of a divine presence.

That plane is coming in for a crash landing.

Indeed. One wheel struck the dirt, ripping out great portions of sod. The pilot, whoever he was, was having severe difficulty keeping the plane straight. Then a sense of doom gathered about Zarkov, and he realized where the plane's path would take it. "Munson!" His assistant was nowhere to be seen.

The door slammed open. Followed by the remorseless white light, a panic-stricken Munson dashed into the greenhouse. The plane crashed through the door and glass, creating a noise the sky could not have equaled if it had been rent asunder by Zeus himself. Bowling over pots and plants as if they were splinters, it crushed Munson beneath its terrific weight.

When the plane finally halted, Zarkov stared at the pool of blood seeping out from underneath the metal. Dazzled by the vision of what Munson must have looked like under there, he pictured his assistant totally flat, his bones broken and his organs crushed and his face

mangled beyond recognition. Though this vision stunned and horrified Zarkov for a moment, he managed to keep his irrational wits about him. He realized the pilot of the plane was strictly inept, but very, very brave. He crept backward into the darkness.

Inside the cockpit, Flash wiped a trickle of blood from his forehead. "You all right?" he asked Dale.

She smiled. "I'm terrific."

You sure are. "Come on, let's get out of here before she blows."

Though the gesture was perhaps unnecessary, Flash kicked open the cockpit emergency exit. But he was so full of joy, so glad to be alive, that he did not care. Each second stretched onward for an infinity of happiness. He jumped to the ground, turned, and held out his arms. Only the greatest restraint prevented him from spoiling the innocent pleasure of the moment and crushing Dale's lithe body to his breast when she leaped into his embrace.

Holding the revolver behind him in the darkness, Zarkov raised his eyebrows. *Hubba-hubba, what a pair of gams,* he thought.

"Just hold me two seconds," said Dale to Flash. "Then drop me and I'll kiss the ground."

As Flash set her down, Zarkov said, "Good morning." Not an original salutation perhaps, certainly not one his future biographers would repeat, but under the circumstances, simplicity was the best. As the couple faced him, he took a step from his cloak of darkness. The hand gripping the revolver was cold and wet. "Are you injured?"

Forgetting the scratch on his forehead, Flash said, "Lord knows why, but it seems not."

"A miracle. I expect you'd like to use my phone."

"Thanks. I would," said Flash, grateful for the stranger's generosity, not noticing Dale was regarding the bearded man with suspicion.

"It's in there," said Zarkov, pointing to the capsule entrance. Fortunately, the capsule had not been damaged when the plane crashed into the greenhouse. It resembled a huge golden eraser; symmetrical projections jutted outward at equal distances apart throughout the exterior, providing the space capsule with an old-fashioned appearance that had appealed to Zarkov when he had designed it, but which he now regretted because it did not look like it could fly fifty yards without exploding. Zarkov walked behind the couple as they approached the capsule; should he take the man or the woman? It did not matter. The white light radiating from the capsule interior was like an altar in Zarkov's mind. Or like a web.

Glancing about the wrecked greenhouse, seeing vegetables growing

in the undamaged planters, Dale noticed the red stains beneath the plane and thought, *Ah, we ruined his tomato crop.* "We've wrecked your place," she said. "I'm sure the insurance will . . ."

Zarkov interrupted her. "Please, don't mention it."

Flash asked, "What in hell's happened to the sun?"

Zarkov shrugged, hoping he looked and sounded like an innocent layman. "Looks like an eclipse to me."

"Are you sure?" asked Dale. "There wasn't anything on TV last night about an eclipse today."

Zarkov became so incensed that he nearly forgot the revolver behind his back and gestured with both hands. "Television! Pap for credulous fools! Insipid twaddle for people who twiddle their diddles!"

"You don't have to lose control," said Flash. "Television performs many valuable functions in today's modern technological society, and criticizing the medium with such vehemence is not constructive."

Zarkov cleared his throat. "You're right, of course. Forgive me. I forgot that if you're not part of the solution, then you're part of the problem. I assure you my lapse was momentary."

Unaware of the concealed revolver, Flash placed his hand on the scientist's shoulder and looked directly into his eyes. "I'm certain it was. You must forgive my tendency to moralize. It's one of the disadvantages of being in the public eye."

"We've all been under a strain," said Dale.

"Absolutely," said Flash. "Unexplained phenomena invariably lend life a surreal texture that makes us all subject to Sartre's nausea."

"I couldn't have put that better myself," said Zarkov, laughing, indicating the ramp leading into the capsule. "Please, right in there. I'll show you the phone."

Flash nodded and smiled, then, taking Dale's elbow, walked her up the ramp. Experiencing a premonition, he was unable to pinpoint its substance. This stranger was a good man—Flash's instincts were certain of it; nevertheless, he could not ignore the distinct sensation of walking into danger. The muscles of Dale's arms were tense.

Inside the capsule, Flash and Dale searched wide-eyed for a telephone. Or for anything resembling a telephone. Three cushioned black chairs with straps were bolted about a white control stand. The white and pinkish-white walls were, for the most part, bare and ascetic, with console panels in two corners. Flash glanced at the instruments on the control stand; they were of the same nature but more intricate than those of the plane. It was impossible, completely

surreal, but he had the sinking feeling that he knew exactly what kind of apparatus he and Dale had stepped into.

They turned almost as one to face the stranger leaning in the doorway. Dale, quite pale despite her excitement, exclaimed, "You're Doctor Hans Zarkov!"

Zarkov performed a mock-bow, acknowledging his identity. "How did you know?"

"I saw you on 'Sixty Minutes.' No wonder you don't like television." She turned to Flash. "Don't you remember? He's the scientist who kept saying there'd be an attack on the Earth! They called him the poor man's Billy Mitchell. They kicked him out of NASA and . . ."

"Enough!" said Zarkov. "Besides, I was laid off. There's a difference, though the reporter from 'Sixty Minutes' can't make the distinction." He pointed the gun at them.

"Are you crazy?" asked Flash, raising his hands.

"Unfortunately not. The attack has begun. I estimate we have eleven days before our moon crashes down and destroys us. I need aid in taking off."

"In what?" asked Flash, hoping to stall for time.

"In this, in my space capsule."

"This is a space capsule?" exclaimed Dale.

"Indeed, my greatest invention. Like many dreamers, I have built a spaceship in the grand American tradition, without the aid of the government or a corporation, taking parts where I could get them, with only my native ingenuity to help me. Though my capsule wasn't built in a backyard *per se,* it was built close enough to one so I can say that I've joined the honored ranks of backyard scientists! And unlike many dreamers, I have succeeded; my capsule works!"

"Have you tested it?" asked Flash.

"No, but I have faith." Inhaling deeply, Zarkov straightened his shoulders, keeping his bead on the couple. "If not, then I wouldn't have worked so hard. The engine for this baby was cannibalized from those of old bombers, and it sings like a bird. The body was welded from the husks of obsolete rockets I purchased from NASA. The other parts I needed I got from saving Green Stamps. No, this capsule hasn't been tested, but I've my resources, young man, I've my resources. In just a few minutes, we'll be taking off."

"For where?" asked Dale.

"Up there. We are being attacked from the stars. I need one person to hold down that red pedal during blastoff." *Which one?* thought Zarkov. He glanced at Dale's shapely legs, felt the pangs of passion

surging in his breast, and realized that if he survived his sally and was marooned in space, he would have other, deeper needs. He pointed the revolver at Dale. “You’re the lighter of the two. Sit down in the end seat.” To Flash: “You can leave. Tell the world what Hans Zarkov has done.”

He’s got a coach’s ego, thought Flash. He said to Dale, “I guess I’ll be running along.”

Attempting to keep a brave face, Dale replied, “Remember to put out the cat, will you?”

Flash took a step toward the exit of the capsule. For a moment he wondered what his life would be like, if he would be able to look at himself in the mirror, if he allowed this mad though decent man to kidnap the woman of his dreams and take her on a trip to the stars. He whirled and leaped like a sinewy cat toward Zarkov. “Run!” he shouted to Dale. Of course she did not.

For an instant Zarkov was afraid he would be forced to shoot the young man in cold blood, but his subconscious mind, which was much wiser than he, suddenly guided his motions. Like a man in a dream, he watched himself sidestep Flash and smash him on the back of the head with the revolver. This deed successfully accomplished, Zarkov felt a heady zeal he feared was totally out of character for a man of peace. However, he could not bask in his glow of victory for long. Before the young woman could act (she was distracted by her concern for her friend), he pulled shut the capsule door.

Shaking his head to ward off dizziness, Flash picked himself up and struck the madman in his soft belly. As the madman was woefully out of shape, Flash expected him to fold like cardboard, but the madman was driven by forces which habitually allow puny mortals to overcome the limitations of their flesh. Zarkov and Flash grappled like animals, struggling for superiority, as Dale watched with horror, waiting for Flash to deal the villain a telling blow. However, when the blow came, it propelled Zarkov directly into a big red button that appeared to have been liberated from Con Edison.

“Sit down!” shouted Zarkov. “Keep a foot on the red pedal or the G-forces will kill us all!”

Wow, he’s really dedicated, thought Flash.

The capsule began shaking like a Cadillac moving down a steep hill with its emergency brake in gear. The engines rumbled and the glass of the greenhouse shook as if the earth was moving. Flash became subliminally aware of chemicals mixing and reacting violently beneath his feet. He sensed fire and destruction only marginally harnessed. Fearing for his life, he suffered a paralyzing terror, for now the

unknown was no longer an abstraction. At least he had known the capabilities of the plane; at least there he had been able to act. But suddenly the Fates had thrust him completely under Zarkov's control.

Zarkov, who had already strapped himself in, shouted, "The red pedal! The red pedal!"

Flash experienced a curious weightlessness, though his feet remained firmly planted on the floor. Then a weight descended upon him. He saw Dale struggling to strap herself in the center chair.

The capsule was taking off!

Zarkov uttered something cryptic: "Sorry, Munson, you missed your opportunity."

However, Flash had no time to ponder the remark's meaning. The weight of a thousand griefs was pressing down upon him, flattening him. Every heartbeat and every tortured breath racked him with pain. He pulled himself toward the empty chair, fell into it, struggled to turn himself around. He was barely able to strap himself in. Without thinking, motivated by instinct more than his consciousness, he extended his foot and stamped on the red pedal, exerting an unexpected strength derived from a source deep within his spirit, a strength that had served him well during many exhausting football games. Just to glance at Dale (who had blacked out) cost him a tremendous effort.

Flash did not realize it, if Zarkov had told him he would not have believed it, but pressing the red pedal activated the mechanism which produced the force field affording them some relief from the murderous pull of gravity.

Zarkov mumbled, "Friendship—built this to send out in friendship—hands across the void—tentacles across the void—couldn't bring myself to arm it—the end now—unless we three can—'less we can . . ." And he became silent.

Flash felt a twinge of concern for the scientist; he attempted to convince himself that it was a purely intellectual concern for the sanctity of a human life, but there was something engaging about that idealistic madman. Flash's interest in Dale, however, evoked no doubts whatsoever. As he watched her still form, he was awash with love and anxiety. Then he turned his eyes upward, toward the white ceiling, and tried to see the stars through the material. Filled with the majesty of space, realizing he was fulfilling a lifelong dream he had never seriously hoped would become a reality, he, too, blacked out.

And the capsule carrying them journeyed into the inconceivable.

4

A Journey through the Barriers of the Ether

FORTUNATELY, the trio strapped in Zarkov's space capsule was unconscious throughout the majority of their journey, for if they had read the data of their instruments and peered through the portholes, they would have learned how puny were the most grandiose concepts of the universe in comparison with the reality; and it is doubtful that even the analytical mind of Zarkov could have grasped the sheer vastness and the startling array of colors through which his capsule passed.

In the fuel compartments beneath the sleepy travelers, chemicals mixed and exploded, one releasing enough oxygen near the exhaust pipes so that a tiny flickering flame erupted into a bolt of fire behind the capsule. The fire died as the capsule, now an insignificant mote, neared Jupiter.

Unbeknownst to all but a few confused scientists who were scanning space for clues to the phenomena occurring on Earth, the vibratory patterns of the ether altered in unfathomable, subtle ways, through incomprehensible means.

The emptiness of space gave way to red and yellow and chartreuse mists borne from some unperceived location upon ghostly winds. Gradually the mists became tumultuous; gradually the capsule became ensnared in a swirling whirlpool of myriad colors, a whirlpool of such power and celestial force that no creature, whatever its species, whatever its resources, could realistically consider escaping. Nor could any creature, whatever its surveying abilities, hope to absorb all the minute shades of the infinite sea of colors writhing like the waters of an agonized planet. A man could liken it only to the fires of the primordial universe, save that this sea of colors radiated no heat. The capsule floated through mists formed not by atoms, but by the parts of atoms, parts searching for form and function and for the fulfillment of a balanced environment. It floated through mists of jasmine, platinum yellow, vermilion, salmon, and sapphire. It floated through scientific impossibilities made mundane by the true realities and physics of the universe.

Eventually, other conglomerations of matter joined the capsule on the journey through the mists. Charred husks, all that remained of burnt-out comets. Meteors. Tiny asteroids. Clouds of space gas. The corpse of an interstellar creature. Upon entering the mists, the capsule left the solar system. After it had traveled for a spell, it reached a location no Terran equation could account for. Perhaps there was no location, perhaps there were many. Or perhaps the capsule had arrived upon a dimensional plane where all concepts of space and time were meaningless abstractions bearing no relevance to these mists—mists of matter so dormant it could not even be accurately described as inert.

Inside the capsule, Flash, Dale, and Zarkov were bathed in a succession of colorful lights. Dale, caught in the throes of a passionate dream, sweated profusely, breathed heavily, and tossed her head about. Flash dreamed of expansive fields, a shirt slung across his bare back, and a blazing yellow sun. Zarkov blinked; for a fleeting instant (for an hour?) he glimpsed the swirling lights. In a dim portion of his numbed mind he comprehended what was happening, and he mumbled, “Space is a device to keep everything from being in the same place.” Then he returned to oblivion.

The forces attacking Earth inexorably drew the capsule upon its journey, refusing to relinquish their hold even as the husk of obsolete parts reached a section of space which was the threshold of the eternal past and the infinite future. Vast, superintelligent beings composed of nebulous matter examined the capsule from their vantage point near the time of the universe’s passing. They perceived its birth from the parts acquired from junkyards and they deduced its innumerable destinies. Then they deemed it insignificant and turned their attention to worthier matters. Probes from other races transmitted information back to computers founded on principles entirely different than those for computers on Earth. Before the alien scientists could decide if they wanted to deflect the capsule and examine it personally, the forces which had already ensnared it pulled it out of the probe’s reach.

The capsule moved past (and perhaps through) magnificent sights. Galaxies spun majestically, seeming to throw away the stars of the spirals like luminescent dust. The corpse of an alien cosmonaut—the size of an elephant, with tentacled legs and clawed hands, its body perfectly preserved in its gray spacesuit—floated above the capsule; it spun toward a swirling galaxy, on its remorseless way to a destination it could never know. A passing quasar cast the capsule into a pool of stark whiteness—but only briefly, for the quasar quickly moved onto a point in space that existed a million years in the future. A disruption in the fabric of the universe—perhaps the implosion of a planet

accidentally destroyed by its inhabitants—created a startling array of rainbow colors that, however the duration was defined, was rather succinct. Later, or what must be randomly defined as later, a star exploded into a nova, creating what was (from the capsule's point of view) the barest flickering of light.

The mists unerringly guided the capsule through another disruption of space and time, and suddenly the capsule was in a sky of blazing crimson clouds, above a magnificently barren world with an array of huge colorful moons beyond the reach of the howling winds.

The sleeping passengers in the capsule did not know it, but their journey through the cosmos had come to an abrupt conclusion. They had arrived on the planet Mongo, the seat of the ruler of the universe!

5

Captured by Faceless Minions

RADIO waves burst like joyous elves from the stronghold, recording the picture of the space capsule on the console screen. The capsule moved from a red field to a purple one.

An obsequious, vaguely electronic (but definitely human) voice said, “O illustrious Master, second only to the Majestic One himself, I either regret or am overjoyed to report an unknown object imaged in the Imperial vortex, depending upon how you greet this unfortunate or wonderful news.”

An unconcerned voice devoid of warmth or pity replied, “You know I disdain such ridiculous value judgments. You should report the news as indifferently as I greet it, O Slug without a Name. What is the distance of the object?”

“Thou art correct, as usual, O Klytus. The object is now parallel to Starfield Zygma Twelve.”

A hand sheathed in gold thoughtfully clanked against a chin protected by a gold mask. “Test object for life waves.”

The obsequious one pressed buttons, causing the console to order that all manner of impulses be sent out to report upon the interior of the capsule. Green and red bulbs flashed on and off in a pattern discernible only to an expert, and a white bulb blinked with a quick, steady rhythm. After a few moments, the underling said, “Readings are positive, but I truly regret to report that our transmission waves cannot completely penetrate the strange alloy of the shell; therefore the form and number of those inside is unknown. A tentative reading of the brain waves registers an approximate Mong-Scale Three.”

“Continue imaging,” said the cold voice without a trace of interest. “I’ll report this to His Imperial Majesty.” There was a rustle of robes and the scraping of metal as Klytus approached a vid-com. For a few moments he was rather obsequious himself. Then, his conference concluded, he turned to the underling at the console.

“I hasten to inform you, in the desolate hope it pleases you, that the object is entering our control range, approaching the Sea of Fire . . .”

“Bring it through safely. Land it.”

Like a ghost suddenly weighed down with a metallic form, but without the corresponding lack of movement and grace, the capsule glided through the colorful air of Mongo. Far beyond the planet and its satellites spun a vicious cosmic whirlpool of stray matter of all sorts —including the fragments of other planets. Mongo and its moons lay in the calm eye of this whirlpool, as immobile as the ancient astrologers had envisioned the Earth. The debris was a continuous, if slightly erratic source of mineral wealth; all too frequently that debris, drawn by Mongo's tremendous gravity after having been checked by the conflicting gravities of the moons, plummeted to the surface, resulting in a barren world of jagged rocks and deep canyons and jutting mountain ranges and large craters, cast in various shades of yellow and brown with a few ripples of red and blue. No ecological system could long survive the onslaught of space debris, but somehow, in the dim forgotten past, a settlement had colonized Mongo; and somehow the ruler of Mongo had come to rule the moons as well. And so this was the forbidding world the capsule carrying Flash, Dale, and Zarkov floated over. Gradually it slowed until it came to a complete stop, and then the invisible rays controlled from afar set it down roughly on a plateau of stone.

Inside the capsule, shaken by the landing, Flash stirred. Catching a glimpse of the colorful sky through the porthole, he rubbed his eyes and exhaled a great gasp of air. He unbuckled his seat belt and turned his attention to Dale, who, pale and trembling, muttered something in a sensuous whisper. Her nostrils were flared and she was breathing heavily in a manner that elicited Flash's interest. Smiling wryly as he thought of the Sleeping Beauty myth, wondering what her reaction would be if he brought it to the proper conclusion here in the capsule, he gently patted her cheeks. Her eyelids fluttered. "Wake up, we're okay," he said softly. "Remember me, remember Flash? We're on the ground—I think." A glance through another porthole revealed purple vapors slowly rising toward a dark blue sky.

Dale stretched her arms and legs like a debauched feline; then she realized her dream was over and her eyes popped open. She was completely awake. Her movements and facial expressions lost their sensual mannerisms. "We back home?"

Flash shook his head. "I don't think so."

Zarkov chuckled softly as he released himself from his seat belt. He tentatively walked about the console on shaky legs. When he looked through the portholes, his eyes glittered as if he were about to be showered with gold. "God knows where we are. I don't even know when."

"What kind of scientist are you?" exclaimed Dale.

Zarkov shrugged. “My apologies, but I’ve never done this sort of thing before.”

“It could be worse,” said Flash. “We could be stranded in outer space with a scientist who earned his Ph.D. in food chemistry.” He pressed the button of his digital wrist watch. “It’s ten after nine.” He scowled, puzzled, and tilted his head toward Zarkov. “The same date?”

After sticking his hands into his jacket pocket, Zarkov placed them on his stomach. He laughed again, this time with zest. “You can throw that away, my friend. We’ve traveled through hyperspace. If the differential equations of the leading mathematicians of the twentieth century are correct, then the curvatures of space have altered both our perceptions *and the realities* of time. As you know, time is only nature’s device to keep everything from happening at once. You must understand, Earth time and distance may have no meaning in our situation. Our home may exist a million years in the future.”

“You’re insane!” exclaimed a wide-eyed Dale. She brought a tiny hand to her pale throat, as if to prevent herself from being choked. Though she was clearly attempting to regard Zarkov’s opinions as nonsense, the view through the porthole directly in front of her caused her to ponder certain existential questions from which she could no longer escape. Shaking her head, she whispered, “You’re insane . . .”

Flash gently placed his hand on her shoulder. “Okay, let’s lay off that now. At least he’s landed us somewhere in one piece.”

“Thank you, but I didn’t,” said Zarkov. He ran his hand over the console, caressing it. “My landing program never fired. Someone brought us here under ground control.”

Flash whistled silently, his mind suddenly bursting with excitement and concepts. He controlled himself. “You’re saying there are people here . . .”

“There’s *something* here.” Unable to conceal his pleasure, Zarkov stared at Flash. He felt himself extremely fortunate to be with a man who, however reluctantly at first, boldly faced the unknown. *He doesn’t know it yet, but he thrives on adventure.* “Let me check the atmosphere.”

The scientist twisted a valve, pressed a button. Studying the readouts on the screen, he pursed his lips, then frowned as he took into account certain variables. “Plenty of oxygen. We’re in luck. Munson, my, uh, assistant, still had some sewing to do on the spacesuits.”

Suddenly Dale gurgled something which would have been a shriek if she had been able to open her mouth. She pointed frantically at a

porthole.

Zarkov exclaimed, “Zounds!”

For they were being approached by a contingent (of men? of aliens?) decked out in militaristic gear, with broadswords dangling at their sides. So bulky and heavy was their armor that their walk was awkward, almost humorous, though the trio inside the capsule did not doubt for a moment that the soldiers could move quickly in certain types of combat situations; only the walking was difficult. The armor itself bore some resemblance to that of medieval Japan, though the gold masks, representing a skull with stark eyes in large hollowed circles, with a black cloak hanging from the upper portion of the mouth and reaching just below the neck, emphasized the alienness of the culture advancing upon them. Surrounding the gold skulls were curious arced helmets, with curved thick bars crossing the black cloaks like shields and with a circular insignia above the forehead. The armor was a red lamellar construction, all of it cut to the same size; the identical build lent the soldiers an eerie appearance; if they were not in reality of a uniform species, then they had willingly relinquished all individuality when they joined this outfit, thus intensifying their aura of menace. Portions of the lamellar were reinforced by gold—conelike structures protected the upper arms and slightly different designs thrust outward from the shoulders, perhaps denoting differences in rank. Rectangular bars were laid across both sides of the chests and backs, leaving space for intricate patterns; there were more patterns on the lower portions of their lamellar robes; they wore gold boots and gold kneepads—but the relentlessness of their approach, totally devoid of hesitancy, indicated these soldiers would not fear pain or death if all their reinforcements and lamellar suddenly disappeared into another dimension.

“My God,” said Zarkov in a numbed voice. “Do you realize what a moment this is?”

“Yuh,” replied Flash dumbly.

“I mean, we’re the first human beings to ever see extraterrestrials!” said Zarkov.

“Oh no!” said Dale in a whimpering voice. “That means they’ll want to capture me and do all sorts of atrocious things to my body.” She looked at Flash with pleading eyes. “I told you: I’ve given up that sort of thing.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” said Zarkov.

“It’s just like in those spicy pulp stories my father used to read aloud to me,” said Dale. “Whenever an attractive, well nigh irresistible woman such as myself encounters creatures from another part of the

universe, they're overcome by this inexplicable urge to take her—brutally!—in the hopes that she'll bear their children."

Flash could not restrain an outburst of laughter. "I'm afraid you misunderstood those stories, Dale. The aliens were only attracted to women wearing aluminum bras."

"Ooh! Wouldn't that pinch?" asked Dale.

"In my opinion it would be most uncomfortable," said Zarkov. "In any case, my dear, I don't think you have to worry about being ravished—at least by aliens. Biological urges and cultural conditioning preclude, shall we say, a chitinous seven-foot-tall insect creature from finding a hairy warm-blooded mammal attractive. And even if those approaching us are human, I daresay they are of a culture enlightened sufficiently to have a total respect for the sanctity of the female body."

"In other words, Dale, he's saying the universe is too sophisticated a place for you to have to worry about being taken against your will," said Flash. "The chances are your adventures will be much more exotic."

"Absolutely," said Zarkov. "Let's forget these hoary clichés of pulp fiction and come to grips with the sheer inventiveness of reality, you know, like a genuine Chekhovian character. We should greet these extraterrestrials with friendship."

"I agree, Doctor," said Flash. "But shouldn't we proceed with caution?"

"Absolutely."

"Stay close to her, Zarkov. I'll climb out first." Upon reaching the door, Flash turned to Dale and said, "I liked the 'well nigh irresistible' part the best." Without waiting for her reaction, he turned the wheel which depressurized the door and allowed it to open. He pushed it and leaped to the ground, four feet below.

Flash was immediately infused with a wonder and fear he had not experienced since childhood. Forgotten were the mysterious energy attacks on Earth, the forced flight into space, the advancing extraterrestrials. He even forgot his love for Dale as he stared at a sky filled with conflicting layers of colors. One section was mauve, another pink, another emerald; and beyond those layers were hints of successive layers, laden with debris dropped from the cosmic whirlpool. Bright orbs radiating heatless white light revealed the swirling whirlpool mists, a marriage of Heaven and Hell. But most impressive of all, to Flash's way of thinking, were the visible moons of Mongo, one green, another icy, a third fiery, a fourth barren, and the last enshrouded in clouds, moons hanging like gigantic ornaments. The visual information, of which the portholes had revealed but a

fraction, staggered Flash, and he found himself leaning against the doorway. He wiped sweat from his forehead and concentrated on maintaining a sense of place. It was difficult to believe that any rock of whatever size could remain steady in the midst of such cosmic turbulence. Yet it was undeniably so.

"Flash? Are you all right?" asked Dale behind him.

He turned his head to speak, but he did not look inside the capsule. "Yeah, I'm fine." His attention had become arrested by the stark, imposing landscape, by more information to absorb. A range of pinkish white crystals stood before tall black peaks. A plateau glowed strangely. Brown and black mountains created a jagged, unnerving horizon, above and beyond which swirled the whirlpool Flash only dimly comprehended. Something about the nearness and perspective of the horizon caused him to suspect the world was not very large, that it was not completely circular. However, he was not even able to absorb the implications of his tentative deductions, for he noticed in the distance a glittering red and gold city of a rococo style, proudly silhouetted against a deep crimson sky flecked with white and purples beyond which moved the vague hints of an incredible array of turbulent matter. He could barely make out the series of towers, each capped with a different design, some with sharp points, others with bulbs, and still others with what appeared to be functioning apparatus. The city could have only been conceived in a veritable lust of tackiness, but Flash realized instantly that its very ornateness testified to the power and resources of the beings who lived on this desolate world surrounded by all the forces the universe could muster.

Speaking of beings . . .

He spied the leader of the advancing extraterrestrials—an incredibly humanoid creature whose body was totally concealed by a red robe, red gloves, and a red hood of a hard material that covered not only the head, but the shoulders as well. Flash could not see through the plasticlike substance covering the eye slits. Bordered, cut in half, and highlighted by black strips, the hood swelled above the oral and nasal regions, abruptly cut to allow for a level, shaded piece that was a combination of a grill and the plasticlike substance. Two black leather straps linked to a belt crossed on the chest and disappeared beneath the hood. The device the leader carried was not quite a gun, but the resemblance gave Flash pause.

He felt slightly irritated when Zarkov and Dale emerged from the capsule. Though it ultimately would make no difference, he wished they had remained inside. Zarkov shrugged helplessly, indicating he was unable to restrain Dale. Flash became obsessed by the need to protect her, though he suspected she could take care of herself. She

had already overcome certain basic fears.

Taking a deep breath, Flash walked toward the leader. He held his hands palms outward to show he was defenseless. “Hello. Can you understand what I’m saying?”

The leader did not move, save to gesture that an advancing soldier was to halt.

“Put out your right hand,” said Zarkov. “With luck, that will be a universal gesture of friendship!”

Grinning (presumably to reveal he did not have fangs), Flash extended his right hand. “We’re from Earth. Friends.”

The leader pressed a button on his device.

The space travelers immediately sensed powerful, sinister forces materializing in the atmosphere, as if the leader had cast a sorcerous spell. A white burst of smoke suddenly appeared in the air before the leader, and a disembodied hand moved from the already dissipating smoke and grasped Flash’s wrist.

I’ve seen this movie, thought Flash. *Where are the Blue Meanies?* “Don’t you understand me?” he said hoarsely, attempting to pry apart the fingers. “I said *friends!”*

The leader pressed the button a second time; a blue ray stabbed out toward the hand, then disappeared almost instantly. The hand flipped Flash forward. As he landed hard on his back, the hand encircled its fingers about his throat.

Dale and Zarkov slowly raised their hands, hoping this was a universal gesture of surrender.

The leader said, “You are prisoners of Ming.” He sounded like a computer with a tainted soul.

Flash looked toward Zarkov. “Thanks,” he said groggily. “You called a real great play.”

Again, Zarkov shrugged helplessly.

The space travelers received no indication from their captors as to the nature of their eventual treatment. Though they were not initially allowed to talk, Zarkov blurted out that it was possible the extraterrestrials were merely suspicious types. Listening to the leader’s cold tones ordering Zarkov to be silent, Flash doubted it. He was angry and humiliated; not since his father’s death had his destiny been so dependent upon the will of others. The only gratification he received from the current situation was the warm sensation of Dale’s perspiring palm in his.

At first Flash feared they would be forced to walk the entire distance to the splendid city, the sole evidence of civilization now within eyesight. However, after they had walked alongside a deep crevice glimmering with white jewels like nothing Flash had ever before seen, and after they had trekked half a mile uphill through a tunnel illuminated by a yellow glowing liquid sheathed within transparent containers, each spaced several yards apart, they arrived at a pneumatic vehicle resting on silver tracks. The leader gestured for them to sit in the back. In the front sat the leader and a single soldier. The remainder of the force stood beside the tracks, their arms folded across their chests and their legs spread apart in an alien version of the parade rest position, and waited; presumably they would wait until the vehicle returned and took the rest of them to their posts.

Flash felt a tremor of anticipation as the soldier pressed several buttons on the console; the leader lowered his device and turned his back to the captives. The vehicle hummed and gradually began to move. This would be the perfect opportunity to escape! But a transparent shield dropped between the captives and the captors. Flash reluctantly relaxed. He put his arm about Dale's shoulders. The scent of her hair, mingled with the odors of this strange new world, hypnotized him. He realized there was now no choice but to do what Zarkov was doing: drink in the exotic sights.

The vehicle took them over wonderfully desolate country. Rocks shaped like crystals, reminding Flash of the Monolith Monsters, projected from the center of an ebony plateau. Peasants of both sexes, clad only in loincloths, scraped a glittering red dust from boulders with tiny knives; they gathered the dust in bowls, as three armed soldiers stood stoically above them. A shower of meteors crashed into a mountainside, causing a slide of sorrel rocks and debris. A mile away, peasants scurried about the entrance to a mine, reacting to an emergency the nature of which Flash was unable to determine. Flash did not know what to think of all this; everything was different here and nothing could be taken for granted. Then he realized that even from a distance, the peasants appeared very human. He noticed Dale smiling with relief and Zarkov looking behind the vehicle toward the scurrying miners with fascination. And somehow they had already been made to understand the language of these people! They were prisoners of Ming, whoever he was. Flash had been so busy attempting to absorb the more outré information that he had overlooked the obvious. He could not resist a smile not unlike those he revealed in the huddle before calling a long pass on third down with a great deal of yardage. He just might be able to deal with this situation after all.

As the vehicle neared the city, it entered a transparent tube. "See

those pale streaks?" asked Zarkov, pointing above the tube's opening. Not knowing how the robed leader would greet their conversation, Flash and Dale merely nodded. "I bet you a year's wages that's a force field," said the scientist. He whistled. "Protection from meteors, no doubt."

"Or from attack," said Flash.

"Yes indeed," said Zarkov, pulling at his beard. "But what amazing technology! I *must* study it!"

"Cease this mindless prattle," commanded the leader. The captives complied at once. They watched the silent citizens standing on conveyer belts that periodically halted, allowing them to disembark near their destinations. The class system of this world was immediately apparent. The peasants in loincloths were the common laborers; they carried their products, or possessions in sacks; their shoulders were slumped, their posture atrocious, their bellies frequently protruded in the manner of those subsisting on the edge of starvation. The contrast between these poor and the glittering opulent city enraged Flash, and he bit his lower lip and clenched his fist with frustration. The other citizens of this world fared much better. The men wearing filthy spacesuits mined the debris of the cosmic whirlpool. Merchants and/or businessmen, sometimes wearing insignia designating their wares, wore bulky robes with flowing sleeves, decorated with intricate gaudy patterns. Soldiers riding the conveyer belts rested their hands on their swords as if they expected disobedience at any second, from any source. Other male citizens whose occupation Flash could not deduce—perhaps they were students, scientists, or bureaucrats—wore trousers, shirts, and boots of more subdued fashions, but the colors remained outrageous.

"Flash, notice the women and children," said Zarkov with an air of urgency. "The mothers have so many children. If they're so fertile, why isn't this world one huge suburb?"

"Perhaps they're not mothers at all, but daycare teachers," ventured Dale.

"I thought I told you three to cease this mindless prattle," said the leader, his voice a little muffled through the shield. Flash was forced to keep his comment to himself. He had deduced, however, what Zarkov had been trying to tell him, and he realized Dale was mistaken. The women bestowed love and anger upon the packs of children as only mothers could, and each group ran a gamut of ages. The reason why this world wasn't overrun with teeming crowds like some Terran cities was that the death rate matched the birthrate. This was due to factors other than rampant diseases. The people were clean, overall, and their technology had reached pinnacles beyond his

most realistic dreams. Flash, Dale, and Zarkov had been thrust into a savage, treacherous society, where life was a meaningless commodity.

As if the Fates had conspired to punctuate his thoughts, on a street below the transparent tube a soldier walked up to a robed man and withdrew his sword. The soldier sliced off his head. Flash stared wide-eyed; his heart pounded and there was a constriction in his throat. He glanced at Dale and Zarkov, but they were looking in another direction, whispering something among themselves so as not to offend the leader. Flash hoped they would not notice his anxiety. He looked backward as the vehicle rounded a corner; he saw the soldier cleaning his sword on the victim's robe; a few people stood nearby, perhaps commenting to themselves; but for the most part, no one seemed to notice the execution, lending credence to Flash's suspicion that death was very commonplace on this world.

After they had traveled in the city for approximately fifteen minutes, the vehicle passed into the most ornate, gaudy red and yellow building of all, with crystalline domes and strange alien animals carved from jewels unknown on Earth. One such statue—an eight-legged reptilian beast—breathed bursts of fire at intervals. For the first time they noticed spaceships, designed for both long and short distances, landing and taking off at a port near the top of this opulent building. Flash, Dale, and Zarkov glanced at one another; they knew, without discussing the matter between them, that they were entering the lair of this Ming, whoever he was.

Flash had never before experienced such trepidation; he had never before seriously considered that his death might be less than a few hours away. Yet he had never before felt so alive. Not even victory in the Super Bowl matched this sensation. He was glad he had been thrust into this alien environment; it had caused his every organ to function at its peak. He perceived the nuances of life with an unprecedented clarity. And the love he felt for Dale crippled him even as it strengthened him.

The vehicle took them to a large, sterile interior, a room with green walls and blue floors, save for a single yellow level supporting a transparent tube down which a platform descended. An elevator.

The pneumatic vehicle stopped, air hissing from its rear like a falsetto groan of relief. Being careful not to trip on the hem of his red robe, the leader got out of the vehicle as the shield imprisoning the captives in the back rose and folded inside the roof. Using the device which had caused the hand to materialize, he gestured for the captives to enter the elevator.

Other lamellar-clad soldiers joined the leader and the space travelers on the platform. As the leader pressed several buttons, and

the platform rose with a faint hum through the transparent tube, Dale stared at the diminutive white eyes of the soldiers before her, eyes she normally would have associated with those of zombies. She did not know if she imagined or if she actually heard mechanical parts whirring and pinging, muffled and erratic, emanating from the interiors of her captors.

Wiping perspiration from his forehead, Zarkov whistled softly. “I was mad, utterly mad to forget a camera!”

Grateful for the distraction, Dale grinned weakly. “Where will you get your film developed, Doctor?”

Zarkov replied as if they were conversing over tea. “Munson does it. Or rather, he takes it to the drugstore down the road. They do wonderful work and they’re very inexpensive. They . . .” He halted, turning quite pale. “I’m sorry. For a moment I completely forgot where we are.”

Dale touched his shoulder. “It’s all right. I understand.”

“Listen, whoever they are, they’re intelligent,” said Zarkov. “I’m sure we can reason with them.”

Soon the elevator shaft was no longer transparent; they passed story after story of gray metal. As they did not know their destination, they had no indication how much longer it would take for them to reach it; but each second was interminable. They could not even hazard a guess as to how fast the elevator was traveling; it seemed to have altered its speed a few times.

The elevator slowly halted with a pneumatic hiss only slightly deeper than that of the vehicle. The doors opened. Awaiting them was a squad of soldiers clad in red lamellar and gold, standing five to a column on either side. The red-robed leader gestured for them to walk ahead. They had not walked twenty steps when a line of prisoners joined by chains running between heavy metal collars, guarded by more soldiers, entered that section of the hallway. Flash, Dale, and Zarkov stood stunned. The impatient proddings of the leader were unable to goad them forward.

For the prisoners, blindfolded and gagged (when possible), represented specimens they had never before conceived. There were five Mud Men; Zarkov suspected one was a woman, but he could not be sure. The features, distinguishing physical characteristics, even the sexual organs, were obscured by the glistening, bulky mud covering their bodies. The moisture preventing the mud from caking and breaking off was possibly secreted by glands, Zarkov theorized. However, they left little deposits of dirt behind them.

The Mud Men were truly disgusting dregs of humanity, that is, if

they were human at all. But the deposits of dirt were not nearly as repulsive as the trails left behind by the shiny Slime People. Dale wrinkled her nose as they passed by. Their odor was so horrendous that an extremely potent skunk smelled as pleasant as a freshly picked rose in comparison. Their gags and blindfolds were tied tightly about their heads, lest the substance coating them cause the cloth to slip out of place. Dale felt a tremor of sickness in her abdomen when she spied a thin wire about the face helping keep a gag secure, a wire cutting into his cheek, causing a tremble of yellow pus to run down onto his neck. The Slime People wore white loincloths tied tightly about the hips; the cloths were drenched in the odorous substance manufactured by their bodies. Dale realized that Zarkov, being a scientist, was doubtlessly speculating upon their native environment, and she decided she did not want to know anything about a world which nurtured creatures such as these.

Behind the Slime People were hissing green Reptile Men with long, thick tails and crooked scaly arms held close to their yellow-green chests. They were not blindfolded and gagged due to logistics, for they possessed faces within their perpetually open jaws. Tiny eyes peered from the red flesh shielded by the two fangs hanging from the upper jaw. An inch below the eyes, thin forked tongues protruded from little mouths. Their scaly feet were unable to maintain traction upon the slime trails left by their predecessors.

When the prisoners turned a corner and were gone from sight (but not quite from smell), Zarkov said, “At least three different lines of evolutionary development there. I don’t see how that’s possible in a single environment.”

“The answer to that one’s no problem, Doctor,” said Flash. “My guess is: Once upon a time these moons developed independently of each other. By the time the civilizations came into contact, the lines of evolution had been clearly established.”

Zarkov beamed. “Why, my boy, that’s absolutely brilliant! A superb example of deductive reasoning!”

Flash lifted the right side of his mouth in a half smile. In his heightened state of awareness, even a compliment seemed monumental.

“But you must realize,” said Zarkov with a confidential air, “that evolution and biology are outside my fields of specialty.”

“Of course.”

By this time they had resumed their journey; they walked down dark corridors with high ceilings. Thankfully, the prisoners had traveled a different route. The décor consisted of pillars, portraits of

evil and mysterious men, vases containing plants that swayed with music of their own making or plants that swiped at insects. The uniforms of the soldiers behind them jangled and clinked with the heavy rhythm of their footsteps. Otherwise, the soldiers were totally silent; unless the mechanical sounds of their interior were some kind of a strange language, they uttered not a whisper among themselves.

The captives entered a corridor leading to the large doors of a circular entrance. Dale gripped Flash's arm. They knew, as if by instinct, that beyond those doors they would come face to face with Ming.

The guards abruptly halted. The captives did likewise, not knowing what else to do.

A buzzing reverberated throughout the corridor. Dale held her hands over her ears and Zarkov tensed, but Flash, used to the deafening roar of the crowd, took it in stride. A huge panel raised open in the center of a wall, and through it flew a shiny golden globe topped with two antennae. The panel closed, the buzzing ceased. The globe hovered before the captives. An impersonal, sexless voice emanated from a tiny grill: "Prisoners—march!"

"Let's not argue with it," said Flash, thinking to himself, *not yet.*

The space travelers followed the globe, slowly walking toward the circular entrance, looming ever larger like a portent of doom. Suffering, wailing demons were carved from the dark, green-tinged wood bordering the doorway. A huge grinning face—fanged, red-eyed, with pointed ears and a single tuft of hair atop an otherwise bald dome—was carved above the center.

"We're being taken just where we want, all right," said Zarkov nervously.

"Would you say that again?" asked Flash.

"We're being taken to the ruler," said Zarkov, slightly annoyed that Flash had not instantly understood what he had meant. "Through subtle deductive means, by picking up scraps of information and extrapolating with a rigid sort of logic which is too complex to go into now, I've become certain that this Ming character is responsible for the attack on Earth."

"I believe you," said Dale, her eyes fixed on the huge malevolent face. Her next remark was forever silenced by the sharp slapping noise of a Lizard Man's bare feet pounding the hallway behind them. Dale held her fingers tightly about Flash's arm as the fleeing Lizard Man emerged from a corridor and halted in shock ten yards before the orb. The creature's eyes widened and bulged, nearly touching the fangs at the top of its head.

“Halt, Lizard Man,” came the voice from the orb. “Escape is impossible.”

An electrical current shot from the orb in a jagged path. Seeming to singe the very air, it encircled the Lizard Man in a painful aura. For an infinite second Dale stared at the terrifying tableau of the paralyzed creature attempting to break free of the electrical snare.

Then, instantly, the Lizard Man was turned to dust.

Dale looked at Zarkov. “Doctor, my faith in reasoning is diminishing rather rapidly.”

Zarkov whispered, “Don’t worry. If reasoning fails, I’ve still got the gun in my pocket. I’ll make it plain I’m acting on my own. You’ll be all right.”

“That’s plain suicide,” said Flash between his teeth.

“No. A rational transaction. One life for billions.”

Without thinking, Zarkov patted his jacket pocket. Whirring like a stricken banshee, the globe darted toward Zarkov and hovered at his side. It promptly disintegrated the revolver, leaving the pocket intact.

Once again, Zarkov shrugged helplessly. “Reason’s the only way.”

6

The Judgment of Ming

THE globe guided the captives through the parting crowd of the main palace hall and took them to a small area in the rear, where they stood before a red curtain. The crowd faced a circular opening before a long flight of steps. Nervously rubbing his chin and mouth, hoping he appeared stoic, Flash studied the Spartan yet colorful décor. A dark crimson tile, the floor was the shade of a sparkling scab. The ceiling, twenty-five yards above them, emitted a soft, fluorescent light; as there were no fixtures, Flash could only surmise the light was the result of the material's chemical composition. The opening, through which there were a number of curved silver bars, lending it the appearance of a portal from another dimension, dominated the palace hall. There was no furniture; everyone was forced to stand. Flash searched for clues to Ming's character from this décor, just as if he were in an office preparing to negotiate a salary increase. Eventually, he realized the lack of furniture was a deliberate attempt on Ming's part to dominate all in the room; each individual was inconvenienced and subliminally rendered faceless. Flash wished he had a lawyer with him, just as he did during his contract negotiations. *Well, this Ming can't be much worse than the IRS. At least I won't have to worry about them for a while.*

Though his baser instincts were more interested in the astounding array of luscious beauties with strategically exposed expanses of smooth skin (in an utterly delightful gamut of shades), Zarkov found his attention arrested by the alien specimens present, in particular by the contingent of Hawk Men segregating themselves in one corner. Tugging at his beard, a nervous habit he sometimes exhibited while in a frenzy of scientific curiosity, he forgot all about the attack on Earth and his dire predicament. His heart pounded as the Hawk Men, clad in helmets, sandals, and loincloths, flapped their large, curiously inflexible wings. They occasionally adjusted the harnesses strapped about their bare chests. Save for their wings (which Zarkov presumed to be natural), they were human in every appearance. The scientist catalogued a hundred questions in his mind. He prayed he would have the opportunity to study the Hawk Men.

Dale, for her part, pretended not to examine the ladies who, for

their part, made no pretense. They frankly scrutinized her, like some men she had met who believed an open appraisal of her sexual potential was somehow the modern, sophisticated thing to do. Though the sheer number of women was overwhelming, though Dale blushed and tried to appear indifferent, she nevertheless felt herself superior to them. The women were only playthings, and this palace hall was their home territory only so long as they remained playthings. However, she could not resist appraising the secrets of their youthful beauty from the corner of her eye. She was impressed with the glitter surgically implanted in the eyelids of a blonde; with the halter padding of a brown-skinned redhead; with the delicate manner and supple stomach muscles of a lithe yellow-skinned woman whispering to a red-skinned woman-child tattooed with blue glitter; with the firm breasts and high cheekbones of one of the most enticing beauties—who stood with her hands on her hips and who frequently licked her wide dark lips when she directed her eyes at Dale's ankles. Though the variety of costumes was endless, each possessing some sort of subtle variation, there was a basic pattern from which the women deviated rarely: long, gauze robes hung from ornate headdresses, providing a semblance of modesty for the halters and scanty briefs exposing shameless amounts of cleavage and midriff, respectively. These women were obviously the most pleasing the city and the moons had to offer. Once they passed their prime, they were undoubtedly sent back to their families, who found them husbands. They were to become like the women Dale had seen from the vehicle taking her through the city, professional mothers whose one duty to the state was to be fertile. Dale tried not to think of the personal implications for her, of the pulp stories her father had once read to her.

Without warning, a howling wind of indiscernible origin swept through the palace hall; the light radiating from the ceiling flickered as if it was fed by electrical impulses (causing Flash to question his earlier deduction); the hems of the curtains billowed. Dale held her hair to keep it from flying in her face; grimacing, she looked to Flash, who put his arm about her. The people of the court reacted as if nothing unusual was transpiring, though they quieted and directed themselves toward the circular opening beside the throne. The majestic, imposing form of Ming seemed to rise before the tunnel's bright red material.

A figure emerged from the court and walked onto the platform. "Hail, Klytus!" called the people he passed.

Though this Klytus was approximately five and a half feet tall, it was impossible for Flash to ascertain his weight—or anything else about him—due to his black robes and his gold, cubist mask. Gold

strips highlighted his hood and shoulders, and upon his chest was a gold design of interconnected Vs enclosed by a circle. Flash could not see his footwear, but he would not have been surprised if he wore goat's hooves. Klytus held up his hand in a perfunctory manner, exposing a golden glove that, extended far beyond his wrist; on his other hand was a black velvet glove. He called out in an impersonal, toneless voice which nevertheless demanded respect, "Hail Ming, Rightful Ruler of the Universe!"

The court repeated the salutation as Ming emerged from the opening. Flash felt the cold clutches of fear grip his heart; Dale tensed beneath his arm and Zarkov inhaled sharply. There was a final gust of the howling wind, rustling Ming's flowing robes, and then it suddenly died, casting a pall of silence over the palace hall.

Ming surveyed his court with brooding eyes flickering with alertness, eyes simultaneously burdened with an unfathomable weariness. Highlighted by gold, the bottom portion of his wide, rose-colored collar was formed by two triangles with slightly curved borders, while the top was circular, concealing the rear of his bald head. Below the collar and running down his torso was a strip of a rose hue, the gold sewn into the fabric outlining the five points of a star. His arms were concealed by his crimson cape, though his hands at his abdomen and the jeweled rings of his fingers were exposed. Ming possessed the lean face of a wolf, with pointed eyebrows and a goatee jutting beneath his chin. His nose was straight and narrow, his black mustache prim and sinister. Standing before the court with the ease of a man alone in his private quarters, Ming was indifferent to his subjects even as he acknowledged them with a half-hearted movement of his fingers. He possessed the aura of a man whose voracious appetites were eclectic and insatiable. His manner was as weary as his eyes, but there lurked in his thin limbs and soft belly a tremendous strength awaiting its opportunity, a strength both physical and spiritual. The captives were mesmerized by his presence.

However, upon three or four separate occasions, Flash could not help but notice a particularly voluptuous, aristocratic young woman, wearing a scanty gold outfit, peeking from behind a curtain. Yanking a leash attached to a collar about the neck of a curious, red-faced midget, she did not notice, or acknowledge in the least, the court members automatically making a narrow pathway through the palace hall, as if they were performing what was expected of them with the tiniest effort. Her only words were barked to the midget: "Come along, Fellini!" Once she had ceased to move, she occasionally appraised Flash frankly, her mouth twitching and her breathing becoming heavy in proportion to the torridity of her thoughts.

Ming made an impression in his thin upper lip with the long nail of his left forefinger. He gestured for Klytus to approach him. They spoke as if they were perfectly alone, though the palace acoustics carried their words clearly to every individual in the court.

Klytus bowed, a purely mechanical gesture of respect. “Were your meditations satisfactory, Sire?” he asked with an equally mechanical air.

Ming sighed. “Oh, there were a few brief moments of illumination, but the glow has deserted me, the insights have fled.”

“That is to be regretted, Sire.”

Ming raised his right eyebrow. “Klytus, I order you to correct me if I am mistaken, but I thought you were unable to regret anything save the loss of your personal power.”

“An eventuality I pray will never occur,” the masked man replied with another mechanical bow.

“It seems odd that a man without a soul would pray.”

“Even the hopelessly fallen have their personal gods, Sire.”

“So it would seem. What is first on the agenda for Us today?”

Klytus turned toward the court. “The tribute of the Hawk Men will be first!”

The people of the court parted to make way for the three Hawk Men approaching the throne. The leader was Vultan, Prince of the Hawk Men, a barrel-bellied, bearded man who walked proudly, his shoulders straight, the habitual flapping of his stiff wings firmly under control. He held his burly hand on the handle of his sheathed three-pronged weapon. Like those of his companions, his loincloth was decorated with layers of leather pieces, creating an illusion of feathers. His chest harness, studded with gold chips shaped like a sun, was the largest, due to both his rank and his size.

Walking behind him, carrying a hollowed stone, were his lieutenant Luro (thin, dark, and unruly) and an elderly adviser named Biro (whose wings were becoming as white as his hair).

Dale whispered to Flash, “I know it’s a little late to ask, but are we dreaming?”

“I’d like to think so,” said Flash, though in his heart he hoped it was real almost as much as he hoped he survived.

Halting at a respectful distance before the steps, his chest swelling with pride, Vultan proclaimed in a soaring bass: “The fabled Ice Jewel of Frigia! We seized it in battle from the royal crypt.”

Vultan lifted the crystal from its stone casing. It froze the air about

it, creating wisps that immediately dissipated, but true to the legends of its magic powers, its frigidity did not harm Vultan's fingers. The crystal's interior sparkled heliotrope and jasmine; however, the exterior radiated a soft, soothing white accentuating the subtle beauties of its crevices and blunt points. Vultan raised the Ice Jewel above his head so all could see the Hawk Men's tribute.

Save for the fuming, silent Queen of Frigia (clothed in a white, conical gown with a crown that resembled an inverted icicle), the court gasped and mumbled among themselves. One side of Ming's mouth moved upward; he gave no other indication of his approval or disapproval. Klytus was, as usual, devoid of a discernible reaction.

Followed by his men, Prince Barin of the Tree Men pushed his way through the crowd. He wore a green cape, emerald-hued trousers, and a golden vest. "Stop!" he shouted. "The Ice Jewel is our tribute, not Vultan's!"

Barin halted only when he reached the steps, though he did have the audacity to place his foot on the lowest one. Flash clenched his free hand into a fist as he saw that right eyebrow of Ming's perk up.

"*We* took it," said Barin, gesturing to include his green-clad men. "Vultan stole it from us while we were burying our dead on Frigia!"

The Tree Men looked at various members of the court and nodded, smiling grimly, not as yes-men but to personally attest to the accuracy of Barin's words. Though it was probably quite true that they feared Ming to their marrow, it was very plain that their loyalty to their bold and dashing prince knew no bounds. Barin's physique fit his personality: He had a muscular, well-proportioned body, short brown hair, a mustache of a lighter shade of brown, a square dimpled chin, a perpetual scowl, and a nose which looked like it had only been broken once. *Bet he swung right into a tree,* thought Flash.

"Liar!" exclaimed Vultan to Barin, grabbing him by the shoulder and turning him away from Ming. "For that I shall plummet your father's grave with my pellets!"

"I doubt it," said Barin. "He's buried in a cave. He knew you cowardly Hawk Men would never defile him there because you fear darkness, and artificial light"—he gestured at the ceiling—"eventually hurts your eyes. Not only are you cowards, but rebels as well. Night and day your Hawk Men plot strategies to overthrow this citadel!"

Vultan's only reply was to raise his weapon.

"Vultan!" bawled Klytus. He paused menacingly. "Nobody, but nobody dies in the palace except by command from the Emperor."

Barin instantly spun on his heel, saluted with his sword, bowed, and said, "Hail, Ming!" He sheathed his sword. Grumbling, Vultan

reholstered his weapon, but only after he hesitated in a manner that implied he had considered open defiance.

Ming now allowed both sides of his mouth to rise, but the result could not exactly be called a smile. “An excellent performance, Barin. We are certain We are not alone in Our enjoyment. We quite agree with your claim to the tribute, especially since we know full well the cause which forced Vultan to adopt such desperate tactics. Our illustrious ancestors had always presumed the Ice Jewel to be merely a legend. We accept it. And now, Ice Queen, We command you to make a full report to Klytus—at his convenience—on how and *why* this fabled jewel was concealed from Our knowledge for so many years.”

The Queen of Frigia bowed stiffly. “It shall be done, Sire.”

“Barin, you and your men shall remain in court. Some of today’s new business might interest you.”

As Barin and the Tree Men bowed and withdrew into the crowd, Klytus said, “You owe the Emperor something else this year, Vultan.”

The Prince of the Hawk Men paused before replying. “Not yet. My daughter is still only twelve.”

“Have you brought Rima?” asked Klytus. Though his tone was similiar to that of a man ordering breakfast, there was an unmistakable undercurrent of menace in his voice.

Still, Vultan moved his hairy hand toward the hilt of his weapon, halting its progress when it was only half an inch away. A bead of perspiration flowed down his cheek, into his beard.

A young Hawk Girl, dressed in a blue gown, with pale skin, blond hair, and a thin face, walked toward the steps. She stood beside Vultan.

Why, she’s just a child! thought Flash.

Ming and Klytus were as impassive as ever as they examined the Hawk Girl before them.

Finally, Ming said indifferently, “We will keep her.”

The pale skin of Rima’s face flushed red with fear. “Oh, no! Please, please!” Then, realizing that an appeal to Ming would be futile by definition, she turned to Vultan. “Father . . . can’t you . . . ?” She embraced him. She sobbed loudly, her wings trembling with the violence of her spasms.

Vultan stroked her hair. “Ming has spoken, child. He . . . honors us.” The hatred blazing in his dark eyes as he stared at the Emperor more than adequately revealed his true sentiments.

Rima suddenly broke away from her father’s arms. Her stiff wings made tentative motions, in anticipation of flight, presumably through

the passageway which still remained open. But she hesitated; she was indecisive. What she might have chosen to do had the freedom of choice remained hers was destined never to be revealed, for the golden globe whirred above the people of the court and halted directly over the top of Vultan's head. Rima stared at it for several seconds. She slowly brought her hand to her mouth. Her wings ceased their movement. "I love you, Father," she said. "I understand."

The globe returned to its place above the captives as Rima walked as one dead to a group of Ming's harem women standing near the platform. Vultan stared at her, once making a move to go after her, or to touch her, but he dropped his hands to his side and lowered his head.

Luro placed his hand on Vultan's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Sire," he whispered, not realizing the acoustics had carried his simple words to every pair of ears.

"Oh, it's all right," said Vultan, quickly assuming his more zestful manner. "She'll come back to me someday. Besides, I've got plenty of other eggs in my nest."

"Rest assured We shall inspect them when the proper time comes," said Ming, dismissing the Hawk Men with a wave of two fingers.

"Thun will approach the throne," said Klytus.

In moments a black man wearing a robe covered with dangling strips of heavy gold coins bowed before Ming. "Your Majesty, my kingdom has suffered a serious economic disruption since you blasted it. We have no wealth to offer you."

"Have you no daughters?" asked Klytus.

"Sire, I regret to inform you that my only daughter of eligible age defiled herself with the captain of the guards. After she presented us with the indisputable evidence of her debauchery, I had her executed."

"I trust it was a . . . painful execution?" asked Klytus.

"Painful . . . and prolonged, to set an example for my other daughters, the eldest of whom shall be eligible in another year. However, I regret to say that this year I can offer you nothing but my own loyalty."

Ming's eyes narrowed; he formed a steeple with his forefingers. He and Klytus exchanged glances. What they communicated soon became obvious, but how they communicated it remained a mystery.

"The Emperor prizes nothing more highly, Prince Thun," said Klytus. "How great is this . . . loyalty?"

Thun bowed. "Without measure."

Ming said, “Fall on your sword.”

Thun gasped and stepped backward, bringing his hand to his throat.

Boy, these guys have tough standards, thought Flash.

The sound of Thun’s sword leaving its scabbard echoed throughout the silent palace hall. The Prince stared at the blade for several seconds and then kissed it. He turned to the crowd. “Let this deed of Prince Thun be an example to all the kingdoms of Mongo!”

Suddenly, Thun rushed toward Ming, taking the steps two at a time.

Ming stood immobile. Not a trace of interest manifested itself on his lean face.

Just as Thun lunged onto the platform and was preparing to make his thrust, the golden globe inundated him with a blue glow. The atmosphere crackled with the disturbance. Thun strained with all his might, but he was unable to move.

Ming effortlessly reached into the blue glow, taking the sword. The Ruler of the Universe examined the weapon. He stared into Thun’s wide eyes, permitting the Prince a lengthy vision of his fate.

The transformation that came over Ming as he turned the point of the blade toward Thun was awesome and frightening. Dale covered her face, but Flash and Zarkov were so mesmerized they were unable to look away. All traces of boredom and weariness had left Ming. He fairly radiated the energies of life. The outline of a black aura, the manifestation of his evil soul, surrounded his red robes. Savoring the myriad sensations of each second, Ming thrust the sword directly into Thun’s heart. The hilt pressed against the Prince’s breast, the blade protruded six inches from his back.

When Ming withdrew the sword, the globe shut off the blue glow; the dead Prince dropped into his followers’ arms. Ming stared at the bloodstained blade and then tossed it away. Already the irrepressible passions were leaving the Emperor; already the boredom and weariness were regaining their control over him.

Thun’s followers carried away his body, presumably to bury it on their native moon.

Quivering with resentment at the cold-blooded murder, Flash mumbled, “This Ming is a psycho!”

The globe above them repeated for all to hear: “THIS MING IS A PSYCHO!”

Flash and Dale looked at the globe in shock. Zarkov slapped his palm on his forehead.

Ming merely looked at Klytus.

“Who said that?” demanded Klytus.

“THE FAIR-HAIRED PRISONER,” said the globe.

The masked man indicated the captives. “Come forward.”

“Well, this is it,” Flash mumbled. “Zarkov, I hope you can turn on the charm.”

Zarkov’s only reply was a helpless shrug.

“Will you stop that?” asked Dale between her teeth.

“What?” asked the dumbfounded scientist.

Putting his finger over his mouth, Flash quieted them before Dale could explain; it looked like petty squabbling on Mongo could lead to some disastrous consequences. As the crowd made way for them, they were subjected to a wholly different sort of examination; now they were to face Ming, who held absolute power over them, and the crowd, made bloodthirsty by the murder of Thun, anticipated a satisfactory conclusion to their audience. Flash returned the stare of the crowd with unflinching eyes; though the touch of Dale’s hand pleased him, he did not have the opportunity to see how Dale and Zarkov were bearing up. As for himself, he was finally beginning to adjust to the barrage of new information; now the sights and smells of Mongo began to take on meaning, and each second promised unlimited possibilities. He was well aware that among those possibilities was his imminent death, but rather than depressing him and filling him with defeat, the potential infused him with a hopeful spirit that made the time of his living all the more precious.

The young woman in the scanty gold costume moved closer to the steps. Flash looked at her closely for the first time. The vision of her overwhelmed everything else. He had met, even experienced, women whose only purpose in life was to drink in all available sensual delight, who lived only for the pleasure they could receive and bestow —he had noticed many such women among the crowd—but never before had he seen a woman whose sexual magnetism and thirst was so overpowering. The scent she conjured in his mind eradicated the stench of Thun’s death.

She looked as if she had stepped from a portrait by a dreaming, passionate artist. Stray strands of brown hair appeared auburn when the light struck them in a certain way. Her oval, tanned face possessed a mien both innocent and perpetually pouting, despite the lustful appetites Flash sensed. He almost allowed himself a fantasy concerning his favorite position, that is, until he noticed a certain familiarity to the shape of her eyebrows.

“Hey, remember me?” asked Dale.

Flash looked at Dale and squeezed her hand, as if to say "Of course."

When the captives halted, Ming stared at them as if his mere gaze could turn the weak into cinders.

"Who are you?" asked Klytus.

Flash presented them with his number-four smile, the one he used during preseason interviews. "I'm Flash Gordon. Quarterback, New York Jets."

Dale swallowed audibly, then she, too, smiled. "Dale Arden, Your Highness. Live and let live—that's my motto."

Zarkov cleared his throat. "My name is Hans Zarkov. I'm a scientist. I kidnapped them in an effort to save our planet Earth."

Ming looked at Klytus.

"That is the planet we were toying with earlier in an effort to relieve your boredom, Sire. You remember: the world of cosmic pawns."

Ming nodded.

"But why?" asked Zarkov. "We're only interested in friendship. Why do you attack us?"

"Why not?" asked Ming.

Zarkov opened his mouth, only to close it in shock when the implications of Ming's words sunk in.

"Go ahead; reason with that!" said Flash sharply to Zarkov.

Ming leaned forward as if he wished to leap down upon them and personally choke them. "Pathetic Earthlings—hurling your bodies out into the void without the slightest inkling of who or what is out here," he hissed. "If you had known anything about the true nature of the universe—anything at all—you would have hidden from it in terror."

"I think that's a matter of opinion," said Flash.

Ming laughed loudly, from his belly. "Opinion? Flash Gordon, I am the Ruler of the Universe. My every statement has the effect of law."

"A law is not a truth," said Flash. "That's something the Founding Fathers of my great nation, the United States of America, realized when they threw off the yoke of ruthless tyranny!"

"You tell him, Flash!" Dale urged. Zarkov frowned, but nodded in approval.

"You call yourself the Ruler of the Universe," said Flash. "As far as I can see, all you rule is a puny little system surrounded by a maelstrom. And as far as your 'law' is concerned"—he turned to the court—"you people must be ashamed to face yourselves, toadying to

this paper tiger the way you do. The only reason he holds the power of life or death over you is because you permit it." He clenched his hand into a fist. "You should rebel. As my friend Steve Rogers once said, 'Freedom is the only cause worth dying for!' You should never die at the whim of a worm such as this Ming."

"He's right!" said Zarkov. "Take away this Ming's title and what do you have: a being such as yourselves, no better, no worse!"

"Is that so?" asked Ming dryly. "I daresay not. And the reason? We Ourselves personally augmented the tracking ray which undoubtedly guided your landing so that it would automatically implant rudimentary knowledge of the Mongian language into the brains of any intelligent species inside, thus sparing Our kingdom many precious man-hours in labor. It is far more convenient to have the audience with guests as soon as they have arrived, while We still have some small interest in the matter. Have you not wondered how you've come to understand Our language?"

"Yeah! Once!" said Flash defiantly.

"We personally programmed the vocabulary. Perhaps you have grasped words which stood for shades and nuances of the stages of spiritual heights, stages you may have reached but did not possess the words to describe."

Uh-oh! He's right! thought Flash. *Looks like this Ming's holding all the cards.*

"We have educated you as well," continued Ming. "We made Our improvements one weekend while We were tinkering around with some equipment. You imply democracy must have some virtues; it does not. The masses must have a ruler, that is the order of the universe. You imply I am not first among men; my accomplishments and the accomplishments of my ancestors prove I am first beyond a doubt. You imply Mongo is not the center of the universe; it is. Do not the cosmic whirlpools bring all the matter of space to Us, and thus provide Our system with plentiful natural resources via Our mining operations?"

"We had some people who thought the entire universe, including the sun, revolved around the Earth," said Flash, "people who shunned the progressive ideas of Copernicus. But it turned out they were *wrong!"*

Suddenly Ming seemed to lose all interest in the conversation. He stared at a fingernail. This was his way of telling Flash the matter was closed. His scowl indicated deep concentration on his part. Then his facial muscles relaxed, and he looked at Dale as if seeing her for the first time. His manner practically intimate, he spoke softly, calmly.

“Come closer; let Us see you.”

Dale tensed, took a step backward, put her fist over her mouth, and stared at Ming as if he was a rattler in the desert.

Something in the vision of Dale recoiling excited Ming. A barely perceptible tremor coursed through him. Flash realized that in one respect the tyrant was absolutely correct, for Ming’s passions imbued him with a charisma definitely beyond the reaches of the common man.

Ming turned his hand so the jeweled rings faced Dale. He pressed a near-microscopic button and a yellow beam emanating from the jewel of his middle finger bathed her. She immediately relaxed, her shoulders slumped and her arms dropped to her sides, her eyes closed, her mouth opened, her breathing became heavy. She turned her head at little angles as if responding to an immensely gratifying pleasure.

She saw the silver-haired man push down the emergency brake and switch off the ignition. The moon was full, the sky studded with stars; the trees and the grass and the lake smelled so fresh and potent. Her companion wore a blue three-piece suit. He took off his jacket, loosened his tie, and then looked at her. Soulfully. Frankly. There was no mistaking his meaning. “I’ve some wine in the cooler in the trunk,” he said, retrieving a blanket from the back. “We’ll drink some . . . afterward.”

Ming grasped Klytus’s sheathed lower arm. It had been some time since the Ruler of the Universe had made an impulsive gesture in the palace hall. “Did you ever see such response?”

“No, Sire. Truly she rivals your own daughter.”

Flash made a motion toward Dale, intending to tear her away from the yellow beam, but Zarkov detained him. The scientist ran his hand through his beard as he watched her respond to the emotional stimuli. *Hoo-wee!* he thought. *I guess still waters really do run deep.*

Sitting naked on the blanket, the silver-haired man gave Dale a glass of white wine. She watched the lines of his middle-aged body, examining how his chest muscles moved with his arms. He was so cool, so experienced. The wind rustled the trees. An owl hooted.

Ming released the button on the ring and the yellow glow instantly disappeared. Dale, flushed and shaken, stumbled as if she was about to fall; Flash grabbed her shoulders to support her.

“What happened to me?” she asked Flash.

“I don’t know, but I still respect you.”

Ming scowled at Flash. That little expression communicated to all that the audience would soon reach a conclusion.

The woman in gold who had stared at Flash put her arm about

Ming's waist. He looked to her as she ran her long fingernails down his chest with a chilling familiarity. "Don't kill him yet, Father. I want him. Give him to me." She possessed one of those voices whose inflections are in the ear of the listener, a voice like a precocious child.

Ming permitted himself the trace of a smile. "What would your Prince Barin say?"

"I can handle Barin. I'll even return his pin if he becomes too much of a bother. Please?"

"Really, Aura, your appetites are too dangerous. You're becoming too much like your mother, may the cosmic whirlpool spit out her soul. I refuse." As Aura grimaced and clenched her hand, Ming moved toward the edge of the platform. He pointed to Dale. "Remove the Earth woman. Prepare her for Our pleasure!"

Though his chest had suddenly become numb, Flash stepped between Dale and Ming. "Forget it, Ming! Dale's with me!"

The Ruler of the Universe looked to Klytus, who looked to the officer on the platform, who gestured to the dark shadows. A dozen men in red emerged. The basic design of their clothing was that of tightly fitting sweatpants and sweatshirts, but augmented by golden pieces resembling helmets and shoulderpads. Each was approximately the same height and weight; each possessed unnaturally large buck teeth. *Must be the fluoride,* thought Flash.

"All right, you ugly bastards," said Flash, suddenly relishing the challenge of fighting them, "let's see how you do against someone who fights back. Let's see how you do against an *American!"*

The red squadron grunted in several different tones, but most sounded like linebackers whose intelligence had been blunted by too many blitzes across the offensive line, the kind that enjoyed twisting their cleats in the pile-ups. Flash held up his fists, inviting the foremost man to a formal bout. He responded merely by booting Flash in the groin. Of all pains, this was the sort the quarterback had the least experience dealing with, though he had frequently made allusions to the debilitating sensation in metaphors. He sank to the floor. His foes smothered him.

He spun in a dizzying ocean of agony. His entire identity had been stripped from him, and he became a mysterious creation whose mind (enshrouded in blackness) was the sole universe and whose only purpose was to flee the torture its existence inflicted upon it.

When the squad moved away from him, Flash shook his head and staggered to a standing position, swaying like a tree stump on the verge of being uprooted. Their legs apart and their arms folded across

their chests, his foes stared at him, waiting for him to fall. However, they could not have possibly been aware of Flash's indomitable will; though his existence had suddenly been reduced to a blazing red river of pain, he would not permit himself to admit defeat.

A squad member advanced.

Flash became dimly aware of Dale standing beside him, preparing to defend him from the *coup de grace.* "Stay back," he managed to mumble.

She smiled. "It's all right. I'm a New York girl. I took karate at the Y!" As if to demonstrate her statement, she delivered to the advancing Mongian a ferocious kick to the groin. The sound of it echoed throughout the palace hall. Her toes dug deep into his skeletal system. Hardened men who had stoically witnessed all sorts of ruthless torture grimaced and writhed, victims of sympathetic pains. They breathed sighs of relief that his immediate suffering had ceased when Dale followed her onslaught with a powerful karate chop to the back of his neck. He landed on the floor like a meteor plummeting from above. Save for the twitching of his foot, he lay absolutely still.

Dale turned to face her foes. She waded into them.

Flash stood like a crumbling pillar as the bodies moved back and forth about him.

Zarkov grabbed a tribute from a Mongian standing beside him. He briefly examined it—an object wrapped in a glimmering green substance, somewhat resembling a football. *Bet this is made out of chocolate,* he thought as he hefted it in one hand. He threw it at Flash.

The blond quarterback caught the tribute instinctively. Through his groggy haze he saw the red squad running about, attempting to subdue Dale. He ran forward, stiff-arming the first man in his way. Somehow he managed not to trip over his own feet, though Dale was pushed into the court by the tide of men rushing to tackle him.

A lamellar-clad soldier pressed a weapon into Dale's back. She understood she was no longer to participate in the row. However, the threat did not prevent her from shouting, "Go, Flash, go!" like a cheerleader.

A squad member landed on the floor at Vultan's feet. The Prince of the Hawk Men looked upward to the ceiling as he cracked his weapon on the man's head, knocking him unconscious despite his helmet. Vultan glanced about to ascertain if his timely aid had been noticed. The narrow, piercing eyes of Prince Barin were fixed upon him. Barin stood nearly thirty yards away, but there was no doubt he had seen the Hawk Man's assistance, a deed Ming would certainly disapprove of —if he knew. And thanks to Barin, Ming would know. Vultan was

certain of it.

Then a squad member flew into a group of nobles beside Barin. The nobles prevented the man from falling, pushing him back toward the conflict. Barin stuck out his foot. The squad member landed with a resounding thud and then lay still.

Well, may all my eggs be putrefied. thought Vultan, twitching his mouth as he regarded Barin. The Prince of the Tree Men pretended to ignore the Hawk Man. Vultan believed it was very interesting that one of Ming's favorites—if the tyrant could be said to have favorites—would aid this Gordon, however surreptitiously, however futilely.

During this time, Flash had recovered his full wits. He ran back and forth through the hall, his adrenaline flow encouraged by the unsolicited approval of the court. He knocked men right and left; he ran over others. Zarkov, by now, was throwing tributes similar to the first with an accuracy Flash appreciated; each toss struck a guard on the head, dazing him and forcing him to collapse momentarily.

Ming spat at Klytus, "Are you certain your men have been taking the right pills?"

Klytus nodded and called for his men to huddle in his corner. Though the tone of his instructions was flat, his gestures were emphatic. The men left the huddle with a collective grunt, rushing out to greet Flash with renewed energy and determination.

However, they had not expected Flash to charge them with greater effectiveness, and when he ran through them, he scattered more than before. The court cheered louder, verging on open defiance of Ming.

Zarkov's passes of tributes were also more successful. Unfortunately, he misjudged an angle and threw a tribute at the wrong trajectory, knocking Flash unconscious. The game was suddenly over.

Ming waved his hand at Flash. "This one has defied Us before Our subjects. We order him disposed of tonight by public execution."

As the squadron carried Flash out of the palace hall, Dale turned to Zarkov and said, "What about you? Can't you do something?"

Yet again, Zarkov shrugged helplessly.

"Don't shrug! Do something! Say something! But I can't stand it when you shrug like that!"

"Dale, I can't help it. As a scientist, I've been trained to shrug whenever I face a problem I cannot solve or become involved in a situation where my greatest effort is of no avail before I begin. Sometimes there's no point in being emotional or sentimental or even poetic. That's one of the first things I learned in graduate school."

Dale shook her fists beside her face and ground her teeth. "Ooh!

You analytical men get me so mad. I could . . .” She suddenly terminated her verbal barrage. She and Zarkov looked into one another’s eyes; in this way, they communicated their mutual sorrow, their pain, their love and respect.

“The scientist will be conditioned by the Imperial Police,” said Ming. “Klytus, I assume you will wish to supervise?”

His hands concealed in the sleeves of his black robe, Klytus nodded.

As the soldiers took Zarkov away, Dale spat on the floor. Acting nearly as one, the members of the court babbled, expressing their shock and dismay to their neighbors.

“This is what I think of you and your kingdom,” said Dale, punctuating the sentence by spitting again. “You’re cruel, pitiless . . . you’re merciless!”

Throwing back his head, Ming laughed in a tenor that echoed throughout the palace hall several moments after he had ceased. “Merciless! Indeed, that’s exactly what I am! Ming the Merciless!” Suddenly growing thoughtful, he placed his forefinger on his lips. “Ming the Merciless. I like it. Where’s my Minister of Propaganda?” This last was spoken angrily, devoid of patience.

“I am here, Sire,” croaked a wheezing old man wearing immaculate yellow and black robes. Wild tufts of white hair grew like weeds from his liver-spotted skull. He nervously scraped together his toothless gums and twitched his chin as he bowed before the throne.

Ming regarded him with disdain. “You have failed Us. You have been charged with making Our name feared throughout the kingdom, and now this primitive Earthling has coined a nickname much more frightening than your uninspired concoctions.”

The Minister of Propaganda fell to his knees and hung his head. “You are correct, Sire. Have mercy upon this pitiful old worm, this useless conglomeration of rank grease and slime.”

Ming snorted. “I, Ming the Merciless, should have *mercy?”*

The old man grinned, the inkling of a crafty light gleaming in his gray eyes. “The inconsistency will intensify the fear you inspire. For if a man knows to expect death, he can make peace with himself and thus be prepared for it; but if he should not know his fate, then he will cling to the hope of life regardless of the odds, and thus he shall fear all the more your royal wrath.”

“If I might speak a word in the minister’s behalf. Sire?” said Klytus.

“You?” Ming actually sounded surprised.

“Until now, the minister has performed his duties well. But even the lowest and most insignificant of Earthlings has a talent for advertising

and propaganda unique in the entire universe. It must be something in the soil, or perhaps the very air they breathe."

"You may go," Ming said to the minister after considering Klytus's counsel. "But remember this: We have yet to decide your fate. Our decision may arrive at any moment between this instant and the hour of your natural death. Each breath you take is Our gift of mercy to you. You may use the phrase 'Ming the Merciless' as frequently as is artistically desirable in your work until such time as we find a suitable Earthling to replace you." As the Minister of Propaganda bowed and shuffled away, Ming turned to Dale. "And now, my dear, I believe I have already decided your fate, have I not?"

Interlude

AFTER the initial barrage of moon fragments had died down, meteorologists noticed certain disturbing alterations in the patterns of the atmospheric conditions that determine the weather. Unusual cloud formations were presented as evidence that hurricanes and tropical storms were developing at places and at times which could not have been anticipated by extrapolating from previous weather patterns. The mean temperature of the atmosphere began rising and falling drastically over short periods, another departure from pattern.

The results were confusing; not even the weathermen of major network affiliates knew what to make of them. The snow in the Rocky Mountains unexpectedly melted, causing rivers to overflow; a few days later, towns which had withstood floods were covered with fresh layers of snowfall. Australia fell victim to a devastating heat wave. In Brazil, tropical storms lasted for days at a time, diminishing into drizzles; then the storms returned at full force. There was no scientific explanation of this continuous rainfall, as the cloud formations in the upper atmosphere perpetually indicated that the rain should soon cease altogether. None of these occurrences, however, provoked scientists as much as did the revelation that slowly, surely, the polar ice cap was melting.

Meteorologists in the United States attempted to convince the President that a state of emergency should be declared, but the President declined on the grounds that since no one had been able to do anything about the weather for thousands of years, he did not believe the American people were going to let him start now. He did promise to ask Congress to authorize some sort of compensation for compilers of almanacs who suffered economic hardship when the public discovered the inaccuracies of their tables and predictions.

Due to the curvatures of space, caused in part by the cosmic whirlpool, time passed at erratically different rates on Earth and Mongo. Consequently, when Ming the Merciless sentenced Flash to die, the weather patterns on Earth had been altering for a few weeks, and the seismologists were just beginning to notice a few disturbing signs of activity beneath the Earth's crust.

7

Flash Bites the Big One

NIGHT was a frequent but not a routine phenomenon on Mongo. In other words, the cosmic whirlpool often sucked in dark clouds of space gas which, as it penetrated the radioactive mists between the whirlpool and the calm eye, prevented the mists' irradiation from reaching the Mongian system. These same mists, forever fed by the constant stream of matter, had also provided the birthplace of this system, untold eons ago. They protected the system, allowing only an infinitesimal fraction to pass through (though this was an enormous amount in human terms).

It was during one of these nights—which the scientists had been able to predict for thousands of years with some degree of accuracy—that Barin, Prince of the Tree Men, stood in the shadows on a terrace overlooking the courtyard where grotesque, hunchbacked dwarfs erected the chamber wherein Flash was to be executed. *Where does Ming get these people*? Barin thought as he watched the blackness move across the barren landscape like an evil manifestation. *I suppose someone like Ming has to take the kind of help he can get.* But he was only, too aware of Ming's methods of securing labor; he merely disliked admitting, even to himself, that he knew. He also disliked admitting that the vast, open spaces of Mongo unnerved him; he did not feel safe beneath the naked sky. He much preferred the claustrophobic, sweltering forests of his homemoon. Though the space gas effectively cooled down the Mongian atmosphere, he felt perspiration on his forehead. An especially salty drop ran down his nose.

With a grim beauty, the blackness moved across a mountain capped with a forest of crystals, their rainbow reflection of the cosmic light sleeping with the finality of death itself. The scene inspired Barin to make many pessimistic philosophical observations to himself, mostly about the futility of personal accomplishments and initiatives, observations that he completely forgot about when he felt the familiar, warm fingers of Aura, daughter of Ming the Merciless, Rightful Ruler of the Universe, investigate the shape of his muscular thigh. He turned and embraced her, feeling her yielding soft breasts through the barriers of their clothing. He kissed her. He nibbled her

ear. Long ago, he had complained (but only to himself) about how her mere presence caused him to lose all pretense of rationality, how her very scent caused him to forget his responsibilities to his people—and to himself. Now he gladly acquiesced to her spell. His pleasure in living entirely for the moment was mitigated only by the fear that the acquiescence was not mutual. “Your bedchamber at midnight,” he whispered into the delicate folds of her ear.

Aura winced, whether at his suggestion or at the sensation of his tongue in her ear, he could not be sure. She clarified the issue, however, by stating, “I’m not in the mood.”

“Oh? I know how executions excite you.”

She shrugged and frowned as if accepting the inescapable truth of his remark. Heartened, feeling the time was ripe to carry out his boldest strategies, he nuzzled her and moved his hands into all sorts of susceptible areas. As he planned, she groaned, relaxing her muscles—a prelude to yielding herself to the desires which rose to the surface of her being at the slightest provocation. Then she pushed him away. And none too gently. “I said *not tonight!”*

Glad she could not see his expression in the darkness of the terrace, Barin bit his lower lip. He did not want her to know how her refusal made him suffer. “You’re impossible.”

“I can’t resist it; I’ve changed my mind. You’re such a . . . such a perfect soldier.” She moved into his arms. “You’re . . . you’re always standing at attention.”

She kissed him with a furious passion.

“Fly back to your kingdom. You may see me sooner than you think,” she said, her fingers searching out Barin’s susceptible areas.

“You’ll come to Arboria?”

“If you fly there tonight. Right now.”

“But the Emperor has commanded everyone to see the execution.”

Aura stepped away and turned her back. He watched the blackness cover the last vestiges of illumination in the horizon. “I don’t care what you do,” she said. “It makes no difference to me.”

“You’re so hard to trust,” he said, refastening his trousers.

Flash awoke in darkness. He felt the chains digging into his wrists, his toes straining to hold his weight on the slimy dungeon floor. From the volume of sounds and their echoes, he deduced he hung in the dungeon’s center. He heard creatures scurrying, the groaning of other prisoners, the wielding of instruments of torture by silent guards who, doubtlessly, went about their work with an inhuman detachment.

Flash did not have to see to know he had been stripped to leather briefs.

He heard the scraping of metal shoes against the floor, the rustling of robes. The scraping and rustling ceased. A disinterested voice said, "You refused your final meal. The chef is very upset." It was Klytus. "I hope it's not the quality of the food."

Though he knew his voice would be muffled by the spiked hood Ming's boys had put over his head, Flash replied as loud as he could. "Your food sucks!"

"Oh dear, oh dear," said Klytus without concern. "The chef will have to be executed for this. It's a shame. You were wise, actually. The gas will act quicker on your empty stomach. Have you any final request?"

"Let me see Dale!"

"Of course. How predictable. How droll." Klytus clapped his hands, creating a hollow clanking noise. "Bring in the Emperor's concubine!"

Flash struggled mightily—almost childishly—against his bonds. Previously, he had concentrated on placing the flow of his strength in one wrist so as to facilitate pulling a chain from the ceiling in an orgy of spiritual oneness. Now there was no manner of reason to his efforts. He could not free himself, he could not yank the hood from his head; yet he struggled. "Damn you! I said I want to see her!"

He heard electricity sizzling through the atmosphere; the hood flew off his head and landed in a dark corner, breaking the ends of two spikes. Klytus had lowered his hand and placed the device which had removed the hood into his robes before Flash's eyes could adjust to the dull dungeon light.

Dale stood before him. Her eyes were misty, she was on the verge of tears. She wore a red gown which under different circumstances would have enticed and fascinated Flash, but which he now perceived as hideously degrading. The gown revealed generous amounts of Dale's pale flesh beneath the gauze cloak hanging from the headdress. Flash managed to grin. "You look great."

Dale turned to Klytus.

"You have until the sand runs up." Klytus walked to a shelf and inverted a large hourglass. The sand ran *upward* from the partially filled bottom to the empty top. With his metal hands concealed in his sleeves, Klytus stood with his mask directed toward the Earthlings, but something in his manner indicated he was totally uninterested in anything they might say or do.

"No kidding, you look great," said Flash, exulting in the cool

sensation of Dale's palm against his cheek.

"It's the eye make-up. I hope I remember the trick when I wake up."

"I'll be darned. That's exactly what I was going to tell you."

Dale's eyes fluttered. "What?"

"This isn't happening. *We're not here.* It's just a bad dream."

"We'll wake up in Dark Harbor any minute and have a laugh about this."

"Only next time I won't just ask the host your name, I'll walk over and talk to you."

"You promise?" asked Dale, placing her palms on his chest.

"I promise. Cross my heart and hope to . . ." Flash winced. "I'll really talk to you.

"What if we're wrong, Flash?"

"We can't be."

"What if this isn't a dream?"

Flash hesitated. "It's easy. You'll find Zarkov, save the Earth, and he'll take you back in the capsule."

"But what about you?"

"Don't think of me. It's pretty plain that one life or even a love as great as ours doesn't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy, mixed-up universe. We gotta fight for what's right if we're ever going to make sense out of this confusing, deterministic existence, and if necessary, we gotta die for it. That's just the way it is, and there's nothing we can do about it. So don't think of me, baby, think of the Earth. She needs you now."

"She's a zillion miles away. Maybe farther!

"Bring it close in your head, Dale. Think of the Earth every minute and forget me."

"Forget you?" Her tears immediately followed one another as she stared into his face. Suddenly she shivered, and she looked at the hourglass. "You bastard, Klytus! You're making the sands flow faster!"

"I am truly sorry," said Klytus, unable to muster an iota of sincerity. "But I just remembered an important appointment."

Dale rushed to the hourglass and attempted to lift it.

When she realized her efforts were doomed to failure, despite the fact that Klytus had lifted it with ease, she beat upon the unbreakable glass with her fists. Finally she was unable to strike it due to the spasms racking her body, spasms caused by her crying. She ran to Flash and embraced him. Her tears dropped from her face and onto

his stomach.

Beyond the glass chamber and apparatus the hunchbacked dwarfs had built was a large terrace overlooking one of the most beautiful sights of the Mongian city—the pits of radioactive material (the radiation was virtually harmless) tapped to supply power. At various points throughout the terrace were stone vases holding glittering crystals of a variety of shapes and colors, standing in black soil. Barin and Aura had overlooked this scene when the space gas had brought the darkness to Mongo. Still, there were flecks of color in the sky.

Wearing a black gown and an ornate gold headdress, Aura stood near the chamber and watched as a few members of the court chatted and milled about. Her arms folded across her stomach, she stuck out her lower lip, an indication she was in a fiery, rebellious mood. She said nothing, she acknowledged no one. Her thoughts were mysterious, even to herself. She did not notice the Imperial Presence of her father until he had been standing next to her for several moments. “Father! You startled me!”

Ming exchanged no word of greeting; instead he partook of a strong purple wine laced with a mind-expanding drug of his own invention. He wore black robes and a black skull cap; his eyes were dreamy with the wisdom of his visions. Finally he asked, “Did you and the doctor enjoy yourselves on Sybaria last week? Don’t look surprised. You know Klytus tells me *everything.”* He smiled. For most, Ming’s expressions were meaningless; but not for Aura.

“Klytus wants me for himself! His agents are always making up lies about me!”

“And why is that, Daughter?” His voice was grave, even for him.

Aura knew only the truth would suffice. “Your power potions and your communions with the mystical essence of the universe won’t keep you alive forever, Father. One day I will succeed you, as is my destiny and my right. And what of Klytus then? He merely plans for his future. He is well advised to, though he does so ill-advisedly,”

Ming placed his hand on her shoulder. Three of his fingers rested on bare skin, and as usual the touch of his ever-cold rings sent involuntary shivers through her, shivers she controlled with minimal success. “I’ve brought you up well, Aura. You’re so much like me.”

She did not trust the fondness in his voice; it was the result of natural love or the natural desire of an emperor to dissuade his children from hastening the future. “Father, we haven’t been close enough the last few years. Perhaps we should remedy the situation.”

“Oh?” She did not have to see her father’s eyebrow to know he had

raised it.

"I've missed the security of your company and the thrill of private moments when you drop your reserve and demonstrate your love for me."

Ming rubbed his beard. "Yes, I freely admit I have missed that closeness between us as well. When I am through with this Dale Arden —I do not believe it will take very long—we shall strip down to our essences and I will tie you to my royal bed and I shall flog you senseless, until the blood flows from the wounds on your pert buttocks, just as we did during happier, more innocent days."

"Oh yes, Father, yes!"

He took her right hand and kissed it tenderly. "And who can say? Perhaps your spanking shall be but the beginning."

Her voice possessed a huskiness she had not quite planned on. "Yes, Father, that would be wonderful."

By now virtually the entire court, silent and still, awaited the execution. The presence of death was very familiar to Aura, but she savored its sensation as never before. Her mind reeled at the plots she had hatched, the games she played, not for personal reward, not for power, not for sexual satisfaction (though that played its usual important supporting role), but for the purpose of alleviating the dreadful boredom that was more like a disease than a habit.

A spotlight caught Flash Gordon, escorted by two hooded, bare-chested guards, slowly walking toward his doom. The Earthling's hands were bound by electronically sealed cuffs. He wore only black leather briefs. The women of the court audibly drew in their breaths as the spotlight accentuated Flash's muscular torso.

Aura watched with interest the other two Earthlings, Dale and Zarkov, as they stood on a level above their companion's path, flanked by two lamellar-clad soldiers, behind unbreakable, soundproof glass. She could not restrain a smile as the Earth woman became hysterical, displaying an unseemly weakness, and beat her ineffectual fists upon the glass until she collapsed on the floor, her body racked by the force of her sobbing. The scientist, for the most part, concealed his fear and pain; awkwardly, he knelt and picked her up. He embraced her, caressing her hair, as she sobbed on his chest.

Aura looked at her father. "Look!" she said to him. "Water is leaking from her eyes! Is that what they call tears?"

"It's a sign of their weakness," replied Ming. She understood a fraction of the thrill of victory illuminating Ming's existence.

Ming would not have felt so satisfied if his science had permitted

him to peer into Flash's heart.

Other than his being extremely distraught at the sight of Dale's overpowering grief for him, Flash was a man at peace with the universe. His only regrets were the deeds he had not accomplished, the love he had not fulfilled, the life he had wasted. Yet these debt's did not seem significant in the wake of what he had accomplished and the love he had experienced. In fact, he was filled with the joys of love and happiness of life. Glad that he had lived, he faced the end without fear. He could not even find it in his heart to hate Ming. Though he would not have helped the son-of-a-bitch if he had seen him with a broken leg lying over a track with a pneumatic vehicle rapidly approaching, his heart remained free of the evil seeds of hatred.

The doors to the chamber opened.

A slow drumbeat began.

Unseen by all, Ming's excitement caused him to grasp Aura's hand.

The guards escorted Flash into the chamber. They strapped his chest and legs into the chair, freed him of the cuffs, and tied down his arms. They lowered a black hood over his face and then quickly exited.

A doctor with brown hair entered the chamber. He injected a fluid into Flash's arm and said, "This will help you on your way." He turned and left.

As the door closed, a hunchbacked dwarf walked from the wings and aimed a device which emanated a red ray, causing the molecules of the door and the chamber proper to travel across the crack and bind themselves together, creating an impervious seal.

As the dwarf scurried back into the wings, Klytus walked out, holding a black handkerchief. He stopped beside the chamber, then looked at Ming.

Ming nodded. Klytus dropped the handkerchief.

A technician offstage pushed buttons and pulled levers.

A purple vapor totally obscured Flash. The people of the court applauded politely, and Aura felt a funny little tingling throughout her entire body.

Ming, on the other hand, threw back his head and laughed. Flash Gordon was dead!

8

Crashing on Arboria

THE inscription on the brass plate read:

FLASH GORDON, EARTHLING.
EXECUTED FOR DEFIANCE OF
MING THE MERCILESS.

The black glass coffin containing the corpse had been paraded by soldiers throughout the Mongian city, serving the citizenry an example of what happened to those who defied Ming's rule. There was no indication of how the citizenry reacted to this; no one dared speak, not to his mate or to his closest friends or to his family, for no one was to be trusted and Ming rewarded his spies well. But Klytus's underground network, which kept tabs on every event or word which might be of interest to the regime, knew this: While individuals had not taken a stand on the context of Gordon's speech to the court, they had not been reluctant to report its occurrence. The information banks of Klytus's computers contained the names and serial numbers of those who had inadvertently reported to spies.

The coffin rested on a metal stand in a small room near the stoves where the Mongian dead were cremated. Here the nobles and their families said farewell to their loved ones. A hunchbacked dwarf wiped the glass coffin clean of fingerprints with a handkerchief; he paid more attention to his reflection in the shiny dark panels of the wall than he did to his work. (In his strata of society, he was regarded as a handsome devil; all the available female hunchbacked dwarfs were warm for his form.) Consequently, he was quite surprised when Aura, daughter to Ming the Merciless, wearing tight red trousers and a complimentary red tunic, entered the private room. She brought with her the brown-haired doctor.

Aura snapped her fingers several times. "Get out, get out, get out!" She tossed a clothing bag on the coffin. Then she clapped her hands as if she was speaking to a disobedient pet.

The dwarf was so shocked at her unexpected appearance that he did not know which supplication to perform first; he merely bowed twice as he hurried out. Aura slammed the door behind him.

The doctor was late middle-aged; he was pockmarked but comely; his body was soft, but that was to be expected of a man of science. He wore a white smock. Around his neck hung a Mongian stethoscope, which basically consisted of two flexible rubber tubes attached to a living bug with forty-eight squirming, thin legs. He set his medicine bag on top of the coffin.

"No!" exclaimed Aura, taking both the medicine bag and the clothing, placing them on the floor. Avoiding the doctor as he attempted to capture her in a mad embrace, she opened the coffin lid with a red beam that emanated from her ring. She stared boldly at Flash's body, covered with a black shroud. "Hurry!" she said.

Pursing his lips, the doctor took a loaded injection gun from the medicine bag. "Do you realize what happens to me if I'm found out?"

"You won't be," said Aura automatically. A pause. "I swear," she added just as automatically.

"I'm a fool for you, Aura."

Laughing, Aura pulled the shroud away; with a trembling hand, she walked her fingers down his body.

The doctor fired the injection into Flash's arm. He casually tossed the gun back into the bag, then applied the stethoscope to Flash's chest. The creature, sensing blood, sent several legs deep into the skin. While the legs absorbed the fresh blood the creature needed to survive, its body mysteriously communicated the sounds of the heartbeat via the rubber tubing. The creature would not harm Flash, though it would leave a temporary mark somewhat resembling a hickey. The doctor nodded. "There we are. I think he'll be just fine." He yanked at the stethoscope. The creature was reluctant to release Flash. The doctor pulled four times before the creature relinquished its hold with a loud pop. "Think it's time to get a younger one," the doctor mumbled. He looked at Aura; anticipation gleamed in his eyes. "Sybaria again? Same place, next weekend?"

Aura stifled a yawn. "I can hardly wait."

Before she could resist, the doctor grabbed her by the nape of the neck, pulled her over the corner of the coffin, and kissed her passionately, his tongue practically caressing her esophagus. When he released her, she finally remembered why she liked him, and it definitely had nothing to do with his personality. Grinning like a maniac, the doctor retrieved his bag and left her, as she had instructed and as his fear of exposure demanded.

Aura looked at Flash. Her eyelids fluttered. She kissed him. Her fingers dug into his scalp as if they could take root there. When she had finished indulging herself, Flash whispered, "Where am I?"

She placed her hands behind her back. “You’ve risen from the dead. I saved you.”

Flash pushed himself into a sitting position. “My God! How?”

“By magic, of course. With a kiss.”

“You’re a brave woman. After an eight-hour sleep, my breath alone could stun Ming at fifty yards. Where’s Dale and Zarkov?”

“Don’t worry about them; they’re safe for now.” She began pulling the clothing from the bag. “Well, I hate to do this, but I have to cover you up.”

“What?” Flash fingered his leather briefs. He grimaced.

“Quickly, before the other dwarfs come to cremate you. Put on this uniform.”

Flash hesitated, staring at her and then at the clothing.

“Oh, you’re such a child,” said Aura. “All right. I won’t look.”

She turned around and folded her arms across her stomach. The uniform she had given Flash consisted of a red leather jacket with golden insignia, a red T-shirt, black trousers, and black leather boots. She watched him dress in the reflection on the wall in front of her. Poking her cheek with her tongue, she nodded. “I like you a lot. You know that, don’t you?”

Aura escorted Flash to a conveyer belt in a seemingly endless tunnel with walls that were white, smooth, and curved. They were forced to crouch because the conveyer belt took them past many soundproof windows which, Aura explained, enabled her father to inspect the labs quickly and, to some degree, surreptitiously. Aura made Flash uncomfortable for many reasons, not the least of which was her insistence on crouching close to him. The scent of her perfume intoxicated his brain; he felt dizzy, he needed someone to support him, his legs were falling asleep and he swayed from side to side, but he was afraid to touch her. He resented her because he could not think of Dale while her obvious appetite tempted him.

Unfortunately, he was unable to distract himself by looking into the labs. The possibility of exposure was too great. In addition, he was not certain he wanted to know exactly what was transpiring below him.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked, hoping they would leave this tunnel soon.

“To the moon Arboria.”

“Arboria? I don’t want to go to any moon. I’ve got to rescue my friends and save the Earth.”

“Isn’t it pretty risky telling that to Ming’s daughter?”

“Wasn’t rescuing me a pretty rash thing to do just for a thrill?” When he realized that Aura’s only reply would be a provocative smile, he asked, “What’s in Arboria?”

“People who’ll help you.”

“Why?”

“Prince Barin does anything I ask.”

I doubt it, Flash thought.

“Trust me,” she said with all the sincerity she could muster. In Flash’s opinion, it wasn’t quite enough.

Flash caught a glimpse of a cylindrical machine through one of the soundproof windows. The machine made him curious. He chided himself for being too cowardly to have peeked into the labs before. What he saw caused him to grip Aura’s shoulder and squeeze hard.

“You’re hurting me,” she said, not without some approval, as she removed his hand.

But Flash paid no attention to her. In the lab below, Zarkov lay strapped to a table, the tip of the cylindrical machine less than a yard from his nose. Green discharges of radiation danced between circular metal bands surrounding the lower third of the machine. With Zarkov were Ming, Klytus, a technician, and a busty woman who seemed to have a position of authority, if the manner in which she slapped her whip against her tight leather trousers was any indication. Though a large woman of an imposing height, she had a figure a Buddhist monk could not help but notice. Frozen with horror, Flash did not attempt to conceal himself as they passed by.

“It’s nothing,” said Aura, pulling him down. “They’re just conditioning him to our climate.”

“Right! You actually expect me to believe that!” replied Flash as he struggled to keep Zarkov in view as long as possible.

“Keep out of sight! Do you want us both killed?”

Knowing she was correct and resenting her all the more for it, Flash grabbed her by the arms; he restrained himself from shaking her. “Don’t you understand? I’ve got to help him.”

“There’s nothing you can do for him now. You’ve got to go to Arboria. What’s so important about saving him anyway?”

Flash released her, glared at her. “Life is pretty cheap to you people, isn’t it?”

“He is only a common scientist, no one to be truly concerned about.”

‘Let me tell you something about us Earthlings, Aura. Zarkov may be a weird bozo, he may have brought Dale and me here against our will, totally wrecking our lives, but his heart’s in the right place and he did what he thought he had to do. I have to stand by him because he’s my friend. With the exception of saving Dale and the Earth and a few other matters I can’t think of at the moment, saving Zarkov is the most important thing in the universe to me. You understand?”

Aura pursed her lips. “I must think about it.” Suddenly she smiled and her eyes glowed. “Have I told you I like you a lot?”

“Do your worst, friends!” proclaimed Zarkov. “Someday I’ll see if you can take it as well as you dish it out!”

Briskly slapping her whip on her calf, Kala leaned over and inundated the scientist with her hot breath. “I sincerely doubt it,” she said in a sultry voice. “And rest assured, we shall do our worst.” Kala had an oval face with classic bone structure, which she deliberately accentuated by concealing all her hair beneath her ornate gold headdress (Zarkov suspected she was merely bald). Her glittering black blouse had loose, slashed sleeves. Over it she wore a vestlike lamellar structure with wide gold borders that rose in curved peaks on her shoulders. In the black middle of the lamellar was a circular gold insignia. The leather of her knee-length black boots had been treated in a manner identical to the leather of the tassels creating the whip at the ferrule of a narrow black cudgel.

“Please, Kala, we should derive no personal pleasure in our work,” said Klytus, concealing his hands in his sleeves.

“I realize that is your goal,” said Kala harshly.

Why is she so hostile to him? thought Zarkov.

“But there are others who believe finding pleasure in one’s work is a virtue,” she continued.

“And what possible pleasure could there be in reprogramming this Earthling?” asked Klytus.

“The pleasure of serving Ming and the state of Mongo for one,” replied Kala, boldly exhibiting the note of triumph in her voice.

Klytus remained silent. Ming covered his mouth with his black glove. Seeing this, Zarkov scowled. Why would Ming suppress his unholy mirth about those two, why would he permit them to use his name openly in a petty disagreement unless . . .

Oh my God! thought Zarkov. *She and Klytus must be rivals!*

And Ming had no qualms against seeing Klytus squirm; Zarkov had noticed that during the audience in the palace hall. *Their political*

situation must amuse Ming to no end. But it bodes ill for me.

Ming paced back and forth in an area where Zarkov could watch him between his feet and the tip of the cylindrical machine. He wore an ebony robe, highlighted and decorated in gold. “As one scientist to another, Doctor, I must tell you something I trust you will find interesting. Due to the curvature of space, time passes very slowly here in the eye of the cosmic whirlpool. Subjectively, it is the same, of course, but objectively, well, you’ve already been away from Earth for many weeks. Periodically, or every thousand years Earth time, I test each civilization our sensors have detected. I create structural disorder in its solar system, causing earthquakes, tidal waves, and unpredictable eclipses. If there is no response to speak of, I judge that system harmless; I spare it. But if the attack is countered in any way whatsoever, I conclude the civilization has reached a dangerous technological level. And then I call upon the vast spiritual resources inside me, my astral self contacts the ineffable oversoul of the universe, and I pervert it to my personal will. I destroy the civilization! I destroy its homeworld—utterly!”

“My God! I was the one who . . .” said Zarkov.

Ming smiled, nodding almost imperceptibly. “Yes.”

“You’re saying it’s my fault Earth is being destroyed!”

“You penetrate to the essence rather quickly, Doctor. I thought it might amuse you to know this before your mind is gone.” Ming turned to Klytus. “Proceed with it.” With a mock bow in Zarkov’s direction, Ming disappeared from view. Doors hissed open, then closed.

“What are you going to do to me?” asked the pale scientist. He feared the truth as much as he feared ignorance.

Perhaps there was a faint note of glee in Klytus’s voice as he replied, “We shall empty your mind.”

Zarkov tensed. He imagined himself sitting up and breaking his bonds with a strength born of adrenaline. But his appraisal of reality promised no hope. “What?” he mumbled, praying he had not heard correctly.

Kala’s note of glee was anything but faint. “We are going to empty your memory as we might empty your pockets, Doctor.”

“No! Don’t do that!” Despite the futility of it all, Zarkov struggled mightily against his bonds. “Please, I beg you, my mind is all I have. I’ve spent my life trying to fill it!” When he realized that the obviously unmoved Klytus and Kala perceived him much as the Nazis perceived the prisoners in concentration camps, he became angry and indignant. “All right, I’ve had just about enough of this. Your unoriginal emperor is going to treat Dale like a two-dimensional character in a spicy pulp

story. You people execute Flash who was a little stuffy but was definitely a right Joe. Now you're going to brainwash me! *That is the last straw!* I'm not going to lie here and take this any longer! And I must say that you Mongians are perhaps the rudest people I've ever had the misfortune to encounter!"

Kala purred, "Yes, Doctor, you are most misfortunate." Her voice froze him with horror.

Klytus nodded at the technician. "Begin."

The green radiation dancing between the metal bands amplified. A loud crackling like a thousand chitinous shells being crushed underfoot drowned all other noises. A purple ray oozed from the tip of the cylindrical device like an ectoplasm escaping from a mouth; it absorbed Zarkov as he increased his frenzied struggles, it tightened about his skull, it seemed to draw substance from him.

Klytus and Kala looked to a screen where flashes and flickers from Zarkov's life passed by like specters reborn. Though the pictures generally regressed toward his childhood, they were intermittently interrupted by sensuous visions of Zarkov's liason with his second wife, perhaps the high point of his amorous adventures; for in an attempt to draw his attention away from the purely intellectual pursuits which, inevitably, demanded the greatest amount of his time, she led him down a progressively kinkier and kinkier path, eventually giving up in disgust and taking up with an accountant whose desires were as prodigious as her own. It was clear from the visual record unfolding on the screen that Zarkov's memories of this time took precedence over his childhood impressions. An especially enticing scene from his point of view—involving black stockings, a whip, transvestism, half a lid of marijuana, *Volunteers* by the Jefferson Airplane, and a rocking horse—was revealed to his torturers just before the purple ray took him back to the womb, whereupon Klytus signaled for the technician to shut off the ray.

Breathing hard, staring at the screen as if it was still disclosing perverse delights, Kala said, more to herself than to Klytus, "Remind me to revise my opinion of these Earthlings sometime. Perhaps they aren't so primitive after all."

"I suppose that is true," said Klytus, "if your definition of civilized creatures includes those with predilections for freely indulging in barbarous, sensuous, mindless pastimes of lust."

"What would you know about it?" inquired Kala in a tone which implied that in her opinion, he knew nothing about it. When she received no reply, she calmed herself with an effort and asked, "Shall we reprogram now?"

"Yes, but don't fill him with anything above Level Three. I doubt if the human mind could take it."

"Is that a veiled reference to your Level Five and your so-called superiority since—the accident?"

"Kala, remember the chain of command. I am still your superior. And I said Level Three." Putting his hand beneath her chin, he turned her face toward him.

"I understand," said Kala, demurely closing her eyes. "Level Three only."

"I will return after hearing reports from our spies among the people," said Klytus, walking through the entry as the doors hissed open.

Kala stared at the closed doors for several moments. She cracked her whip on her thigh; she placed her other hand on her *derriere.* She thought of years past, of how she had openly declared her undying love and passion for Klytus after the accident that had increased his sexual potential even as it had squandered it, of the chemicals that had caused the glands regulating his emotions to go into a kind of hibernation that verged, if not on dormancy, than on deterioration, and of the many deaths that had befallen her when, after she had brazenly supplicated and humiliated herself before him, demonstrating in graphic details her proposals for their immediate future, he had matter-of-factly declared her body held no possible interest to him; even if he permitted her to touch it in the provocative ways she dreamed, he would be unable to feel the sensation. The rhythmic sting of her whip now caused her leg to throb with a stimulating heat. Her smile was cold and grim when she turned it on Zarkov. The indifference in her voice fully matched that of Klytus when she said to the technician, "Level Six."

The ebony night of Mongo was ending when Flash and Aura walked onto the spacecraft dock nestling between the tallest towers of the castle. Seeing the size of the red tower nearly a hundred yards away, directly in front of him, Flash came close to comprehending, for the first time, the mighty fortress that was Ming's. Beyond the tower, great shards of red-tinged and blue-tinged light broke through the thinning space clouds, exposing portions of the barrenness below. Though the scene was magnificent, it did not awe Flash. The Mongian landscape was a drab parody of sterility, and there could be nothing awe inspiring about seeing it stir to its vague half-life. Of course, a Mongian might discern a certain grim beauty in it, but none of the soldiers in the sleek uniforms of Ming's space corps, who milled about

and occasionally smoked a particularly odorous type of cigarette, noticed the concluding moments of the night.

The uniforms which most closely matched Flash's red jacket and black trousers seemed to belong to men in authority.

Flash had already stood on the port for several moments before he realized what he was doing: coolly exposing himself to men who would surely recognize him. The muscles of his neck tensed like coils of rope, but he struggled to keep his mouth impassive and to quell the panic in his eyes.

One by one, the men saluted Aura. She returned their salutes and they smiled as they stood at attention. Flash saluted as few times as possible, as many men as possible at a time, in an attempt to avoid notice in case he was committing a grievous error. In addition, he realized that if he created a steady movement, more men would be predisposed to study his features.

"What are you trying to do?" Flash asked between his teeth as he and Aura walked toward one of the rockets. "I'm going to be recognized!"

Aura unfastened a button near the threshold of her bosom, and now her breasts strained desperately for freedom from her tight red jumpsuit. "I doubt they'll be paying much attention to your face," she said imperiously. "Fall three steps behind me. Only Ming himself may walk by my side!"

Flash resisted the urge to snap back at her. Of course she was correct. He could not deviate from custom. He could not permit his pride to be his downfall. He complied with her instructions.

He only glimpsed the larger fliers—silver or golden cigar-shaped objects, with fins and sharply articulated wings and huge tinelike protuberances fixed onto the bows. With their platforms bordered by thin low railings (at different places, depending on their design), the large fliers resembled Barsoomian vessels. Flash and Aura walked toward a bullet-shaped version devoid of platforms, containing a cabin with enough space only for a pilot and, if available, a copilot. Painted a dull red with glossy yellow half circles and bars highlighting its structure, the flier resembled a toy more than a functioning ship. Its bow protuberance was a little stub; a stylish silver fin stood on top of the cabin; its wings were hardly well-articulated. Standing about or leaning on the flier were three noncoms, wearing black trousers with red stripes and black shirts with red and yellow buttons and patches; they snapped to attention long before Aura's whispers to Flash were within their hearing range.

"When they open the door for us," she said, "get directly into the

pilot's seat."

"Eh?" Flash replied. He was afraid the sudden, noisy wind blowing pockets of brown and black dust like crippled dervishes had caused him to misunderstand her.

But she did not have the opportunity to repeat herself. The soldiers saluted her; they squinted from the dust (the burst of wind was already dying) and they refrained with difficulty from overtly staring at Aura's diversion. Flash realized his escape was as good as made.

"You promised me a lesson, pilot," said Aura woodenly as an eager soldier opened the flier door. "Are you ready to, uh, give it to me today?"

Flash touched his eyebrow. "Never fear, my most illustrious lady. When you're safe in my hands, you'll soon enough overcome your fear of flying."

Inside the flier, Flash was unable to conceal his consternation. The controls deviated from any design he had ever seen; they were positively incomprehensible, with panels that consisted merely of colored squares and others that were a morass of buttons, levers, and wires. Even the curved ceiling was layered with controls and apparatus, including two perplexing devices of three connected parallel bars vaguely shaped like a helmet, one above each seat.

"Don't worry; it's a lot easier than it looks," said Aura, directing Flash to his chair. Sitting down herself, she passed a hand over a panel. The colored squares—red, green, blue, and yellow—glowed, and the ferocious engines buzzed like a slew of irate bumblebees. She pulled a microphone toward her face, pressed a button on its side. "Stand clear for blastoff!" Her voice echoed in the loud speakers above the dock. She passed her hand over the panel again.

Before Flash had the opportunity to fasten his safety belt, the flier was propelling itself toward the crimson skies above. Flash could not help but notice that Aura was pointedly leaving her diversion intact.

* * *

Dale lay on a luxurious, circular bed of silk pillows and silk sheets. Though a portion of her mind was still alert (she had estimated that the bed could comfortably hold twenty writhing bodies, so long as only five were reaching the most frenzied heights of ecstasy), she had never before experienced such an all-consuming numbness. She feared her impending fate with all her instinct, but all her intellect and emotional thought was focused on the loss of the great romantic love she had always yearned for. She had known it so briefly! Her numbness making her unable to distract herself with the smooth cool

touch of the silk, Dale did not wonder about the chambers beyond this one (which was just large enough to contain the bed), she did not strain to hear the chatter of the harem women next door. She had been unable to arouse a flicker of interest when the women exchanged her red gown for this white one, an exact duplicate in all other respects. Apparently, Ming had changed his mind about what color would most please him. She cried for Flash, she prayed a part of his soul resided in her, she wished she had known him better, both socially and Biblically, she feared the cold merciless creature whose hands would soon caress her, who would demand that her (physical) passion match his, who would soon soil her private parts with his filthy seed, who doubtlessly would force her to engage in acts which if performed with Flash would be glorious statements of love directed toward the oversoul, but while performed with Ming would be hideous mockeries of Nature's great gifts to humanity.

The door between the harem and the bed hissed open. Dale shivered, resisting the urge to cover her eyes; was it Ming? The question plunged her to the utmost depths of despair. She reluctantly turned, breathed an involuntary sigh of relief. It was Hedonia, an imposing brunette wearing a flimsy series of veils exposing an array of freckles on her shoulders and back. On a tray, balanced on her left hand as if she were a truckstop waitress, was a bronze chalice; the liquid inside bubbled audibly. Hedonia knelt beside her. "Drink this, Earthling."

Dale peered into the chalice. She wrinkled her nose at the odor of the aquamarine liquid. "What is it?"

"It has no name. Many brave men died bringing it from Galaxy 6R-3Y. When the stocks become depleted, many more brave men will die. Here; drink it. It will make your time with Ming more agreeable."

Dale lifted her hand to knock away the chalice, but then she reconsidered. "Will it make me forget?"

"No, but you won't mind remembering."

Dale took the chalice and drank from it. The final swallow nearly caused her to gag. She returned the empty chalice to Hedonia and waited for the liquid to take its effect. Before a minute had passed, she felt a curious warmth in her stomach; all her fears and tensions had been erased, and she was in tune with the rhythms of life and the mysteries of the universe. She perceived that nothing was evil and nothing was good, that everything was, instead, neutral. She accepted Flash's death and her impending fate with an elated fatalism. In addition, her head spun, sweat beaded on her brow, and she had a vicious attack of heartburn. Her eyes widened. "Wow. That stuff isn't bad at all."

"That's why men don't mind dying for it. Listen: soon a slave girl will bring you a potion which will unleash your carnal desires. You will be absolutely pliable to Ming's instructions. He will take you to . . ."

"Don't tell me; let me guess. He'll take me to undreamed-of sexual heights. Right?"

Hedonia was somewhat taken aback. "Why, yes. How did you know?"

Dale shrugged. "Lady, I've heard it all before, and I haven't believed any of it. Does Ming always need this potion to get his women excited?"

Hedonia lowered her eyes. "I cannot comment on that."

"You'd better tell the slave girl to bring me a double dose. I may not care what's happening to me, thanks to this nameless drink here, but it's going to take one hell of an aphrodisiac to get me aroused."

Kala regarded the tiny eye-slits of Klytus's mask. Perhaps more than Ming, she deduced his mood or thoughts from his eyes; she perceived the near-nonexistent with clarity. She drew information fraught with countless ramifications from the rapidity of his blinking and the movements of the pupils, not to mention all the other avenues of acquiring knowledge that were open to her in those six square inches. Thus far, his eyes had revealed no inkling that he was aware of her duplicities. Nevertheless, Kala scrutinized them with a dangerous transparency. Could it be he actually did not suspect she had given Zarkov a Level Six Indoctrination, reducing him to a mindless zombie? *No matter,* she thought, tingling with excitement, *he'll know soon enough.*

As Klytus unfastened the last of the straps holding Zarkov to the table, he asked, "What is your name?"

"Hans Zarkov, Agent Number 2133 of the Imperial Anti-Insurgent Espionage Group." The Earth scientist saluted with a raised fist, although he remained too weak to stand. "Hail Ming!" He lowered his arm, cupped his hands in his lap, looked at Klytus, and grinned like a child.

"What is your mission?"

"To seek individuals or groups who work to overthrow the Established Order of the Universe."

"What is your favorite color?"

"Khaki."

Klytus nodded. His hands, too, were cupped, and his shoulders were

slightly slumped. “Good, good,” he said with a faint note of satisfaction that astonished Kala (for it was so uncharacteristic during circumstances such as these). “We must now proceed with the physical tests.”

Kala’s mouth twitched twice.

A technician handed Klytus a ball of ice soaked in a red syrup, standing on an inverted soy cone. Klytus inspected it as if he were about to consume it personally. “This is to test your reflexes,” he said. Then, with a professional, almost nonchalant air, keeping his elbow straight all the while, he gave the ball of ice to Zarkov.

Zarkov took it gingerly; he slowly, oh so slowly opened his mouth . . . and promptly shattered the ice on his forehead.

* * *

Aura’s rocket soared through veils of numerous hues in the sky. Though the flier felt sturdy to Flash, it was still like a gigantic toy, fragile in a few important places. As soon as it had left the docking area, Aura programmed navigational instructions into it; then she turned to Flash, crossed her legs, folded her hands over her knee, and began a spate of idle banter designed to lull Flash into a false sense of security. Incidentally, between remembrances and compliments, she taught him how to operate the controls. The complex system turned out to be simple; the automatic pilot did most of the work, and Flash did most of the little deviations from the course.

The veil lengths gradually became smaller; soon they were passing through a veritable kaleidoscope. The mesmerizing colors engulfed Flash in a hazy euphoria; time slowed, his fears for Dale and Zarkov receded into the background. And Aura sat through the cascade of beauty as if there was nothing unusual about it, as if one saw this sort of thing every day. For the first time, Flash envied the savage princess. Maybe she did.

Suddenly, they were awash in a green sky with a density that, however illusionary, equaled that of an ocean. The atmosphere nearly buoyed the flier. In the center of the mists floated a tiny world with thick white clouds—and with glaring streaks of charred land—carved into the light green surface.

“That’s Aquaria. Once it was the lovely Water Kingdom of the Lizard Men. They rebelled . . . and my father blasted them!” She grinned, speaking her last words with relish. She then realized that Flash disapproved. “It seems cruel, I know, but how else should one rule the universe?”

Flash bit back his reply as he bore to the left more sharply than the

automatic pilot had intended. Aura watched his impassive face; occasionally a muscle in his neck twitched. She rubbed the upper crests of her breasts. She stirred deliciously in her seat.

The red flier burst into the cool blue sky as if breaking through the surface of water. Dropping his stoic manner for an instant, forgetting the intoxicating scent of his benefactress, Flash gaped at the moon of Frigia, a semicircular hunk of ice floating in a cold pocket of the atmosphere, with icicles fifty miles long, with bases twenty miles in diameter, hanging from the edge of the southern hemisphere. There were crevices and valleys like huge slashes made with a giant butcher knife, but they only served to increase the moon's hold on Flash's imagination. The Terran quarterback felt his heart drawn to this cruel vista of death; he yearned for the peace of its cold embrace even as he yearned to challenge it for the sheer glory of survival.

"Every moon of Mongo is a kingdom," said Aura, continuing the conversational tack. She seemed oblivious to the glorious vision in the sky. "My father keeps them fighting each other constantly. It's a really brilliant strategy."

She talks like a surfer girl from southern California, thought Flash, resuming his impassiveness but surreptitiously orbiting the moon by overriding the automatic pilot. *I guess when you've got her other attractions, you don't have to talk like an adult.* "Why don't the moons unite their forces and overthrow Ming?" he asked, hoping to keep his mind off those attractions.

Aura giggled. (Flash's stomach turned.) "You saw what happened to the Lizard Men," she said. "Hey! Keep us on a straight course!" She quickly reset the flier on automatic pilot. Satisfied, she pressed a button; the three metal bars descended on two rods; Aura maneuvered them until they slipped over her head. Squirming, she closed her eyes and concentrated.

Before long, Flash blurted, "What's that?"

Aura sighed like a martyr. She pressed the same button and the rods took the device to the ceiling. "A thought amplifier. I'm going to call up Barin. Don't you have thought transmissions on Earth?"

"Sometimes there's a telepathic incident, but I've never witnessed one."

"You mean you can't read my thoughts?" The manner in which she stared at him and fiddled with her open collar fully revealed them.

Sighing, Flash gestured with his palm upturned. "I came here with Dale."

"She's not here now. And you know the old saying: 'If your baby's millions of parsecs away, love the one you're with.' "

In exasperation, Flash looked toward the ceiling. He saw the amplifier over his head. “Wait! Could I call Dale with that?”

Aura accentuated her perpetually pouting expression. “If I showed you how. But I’m not about to.”

Flash exuded friendliness and warmth; he had switched on the old Gordon charm. “Pretty please?”

“You’ll have to use more effective persuasion than that,” she said, leaning over to touch his hair.

He moved away from her and felt relieved when she sank into her seat and pondered her next strategy. Rubbing his hand over his mouth as if to wipe away an imaginary kiss, he studied the consoles. *Why didn’t you watch what she was doing?* He pressed buttons, passed his hands over panels, and flicked switches, but nothing happened. He scowled. Suddenly, he passed his hand over the flight control console with a determined, final air. Frigia began to grow ominously larger through the window.

“What are you doing?” asked Aura.

Flash ignored her; he did not even shrug. Aura scrambled for the controls, but Flash grabbed her arm; he roughly threw her to her seat. She stared at him with loathing. After a moment she stood up before the controls so it would be more difficult for Flash to restrain her. He, too, stood, bracing himself behind her and tightly holding her wrists, forcing her hands to rest against her breasts.

“Let me go!” she squealed. “We’re diving into Frigia!”

“So what else is new?”

Aura attempted to kick him. Wrapping his left leg about hers, he held her easily. She gave up, realizing his strength could incapacitate her with a mere second of effort. “We’re going to be killed!”

“Not if I tune in on Dale,” said Flash.

Dale lay on her stomach; her eyes were closed and she tried to block out the chattering harem women. She wished the minutes were longer, so as to delay Ming’s approach, and she wished they were shorter so the ordeal would be over that much more quickly. The nameless drug was unable to combat her ever-growing fear of the immediate future.

Dale—it’s me—Flash—are you—receiving me?

Her heart pounding, her breathing rapid, she sat up, verging on sheer panic for the first time since arriving on Mongo. Suddenly her greatest fear had become that of losing her sanity.

It's telepathy. I'm inside your head. Just try to think of me!

Flash clenched his fist in front of Aura's face; he was not threatening her, he was merely expressing his frustration. The amplifier bars around his head shimmered with a dull blue glow. "She's not getting me!"

"I must reverse my earlier sentiments and tell you not to use your brain, but your mouth instead." She straddled him, rubbing her groin and inner thighs against his legs. The heat of her body as well as the heat of the blue glow caused him to break out in a sweat.

I'm with you, Dale. Just concentrate hard and think to me!

Can this be real? I saw you executed. You sure this isn't an instance of Jung's active imagination?

I was saved, I tell you, thought Flash, desperate to convince her. *I'm still alive. I never felt so alive!*

Oh thank God! thought Dale, nearly swooning. *Where are you?*

In a rocket, racing to the moon of Arboria for help. Are you okay?

I'm terrific. Even in her thoughts, Dale's sarcasm was like undiluted lemon extract. *I'm a prisoner in Ming's royal sack.*

Flash did not know which development shocked him the most: Dale's predicament or the fact that Aura was now kissing him, expertly nibbling at his lips and caressing his teeth with her tongue. Somehow she had divined every erogenous zone around and inside his mouth. Her fingers quickly unfastened his jacket; beneath his T-shirt, his chest smoldered with her heat, pouring through the material as if it did not exist. Flash tried not to pay attention to what her other hand was doing. *Fake Ming out!* he thought.

How?

Come on, girls know how. It's been done to me before.

It has? Dale asked.

Just pretend you're in high school, and fake Ming out till I get back.

It's too dangerous for you here. You can't come back. Stay where you're safe and I'll find Dr. Zarkov somehow!

God! This chick really knows how to turn a man on!

I didn't quite get that, thought Dale. *Think it again.*

Flash shoved Aura off his lap; she landed on her elbow and her coccyx, her back smashing against the console. *Forget I thought it. It wasn't about you anyway!*

What!? Dale heard a door slide open; the knuckle of her right forefinger in her mouth, she turned to look, expecting Ming prancing like a stallion, ready to shower her with the most personal and (in this

case) repulsive attention. But it was only a slave girl, a tall, buxom redhead wearing a shimmering golden gown, carrying another chalice filled with a liquid.

Hang up, Dale thought to Flash. *I've got to go!*

Where?

Someone's in here. We've got to stop thinking like this!

The slave girl bowed. "I am pleased to inform you that his Imperial Majesty shall grace you with his presence very soon. I have with me a potion which shall prepare you physically and emotionally for the ardors of love which will surely follow close upon his arrival."

Dale patted a silk cushion beside her. "Come here, sit down."

The slave girl shook her head. "I regret to inform you it is forbidden."

"By whom?"

"No one in particular. It simply is not customary."

"It is if I ask it. Now sit and chat a spell. Besides, I hate to drink alone."

Sitting, the slave girl offered Dale the chalice. Dale took it, but did not drink; she said, "Tell me, what's your opinion of Ming?"

"He is the Most Illustrious Ruler of the Universe."

"Don't give me that. I mean, what's your opinion of him *sexually?"*

The slave girl paled. "I've never heard any complaints. No one would dare; she would be executed." She paused. "I do not believe we are permitted to have an opinion, though of course if Ming the Merciless ever desired me, I would gladly submit to the rigors of his investigations."

"So then you would enjoy it?"

"I would strive to do so," replied the slave girl, demurely bowing her head.

"What attracts you to Ming?"

The slave girl looked toward the ceiling; a dreamy haze glistened in her eyes. "He is so forceful, so ready to order executed those who slightly displease him. Those who greatly displease him are tortured. When he personally slew Prince Thun today, I experienced a beautiful tingling sensation, as if my spirit had flown to the stars and back. Yes, I admit it; I would freely submit to the caresses of Ming. However, I fear I am unworthy, for he has never noticed me." Again, she bowed her head.

"Would you care for a sip?" asked Dale, holding the chalice toward her.

The slave girl shook her head. “It is forbidden. This ration was selected for Ming’s Chosen, and I shall not receive my slave’s rations until the end of the week.”

“Oh go ahead. I can’t finish it all by myself.”

With trembling fingers, the slave girl took the chalice. She sipped it, then paused.

Dale nodded. “Quality stuff, isn’t it?” As the slave girl prepared to take another sip, Dale tilted the chalice, forcing her to take larger and larger gulps. “Bottoms up, sweety.” *In more ways than one.*

Aura’s pouting expression was uncharacteristically sincere as she sat with her arms folded beneath her breasts and her eyes straight ahead. Flash could not resist smiling to himself, but only because she would not see it. Extrapolating from hints about her past and what little he knew about Mongian society, Flash deduced she was confused and hurt, for surely she had never been so rudely and soundly rejected.

“You men!” she snarled, breaking a silence of several minutes. “You think your pride is so important that you must maintain your so-called honor because it somehow supplies you with your masculine attributes. I must inform you, Gordon, I know from long personal experience that all men give in sooner or later, regardless of their pride. In the end, nothing is more important to them than coupling with a woman like me. You’re no different, Gordon. You’ll succumb to my charms . . . eventually.”

Despite himself, Flash felt sorry for her. He sadly shook his head. “Aura, I’ll be frank with you. I get the itch every once in awhile, and I scratch it too, just like every other robust, red-blooded American male I know, but I don’t scratch it with just anybody. Honey, you just don’t understand what makes a man tick. There’s more to a satisfying relationship than physical beauty, sophisticated techniques, compatible perversions, and a ravenous sexual appetite. There has to be mutual respect, kindness, consideration, the desire to have a mature and meaningful relationship however long it lasts, and full acknowledgment of the male as a human being in his own right. Men aren’t cheap vessels you can use up and throw away. Men have feelings too, and the sooner you realize that, the sooner you’ll reach some of the more rewarding plateaus of life.”

Aura stuck out her lower lip. *I don’t think she believes me,* Flash thought as he suffered a long moment of despondency. It would certainly make things a lot easier if he reached the center of decency he sensed in her evil, perverted heart.

The red flier was hurtling through the verdant skies spotted with

yellow droplets that warmed the moon of Arboria, trapping and holding the heat generated by the cosmic whirlpool. White mists swirling about, dissipating in the flier's wake like fibers shorn by antimatter energy rays. Eventually, the tiny rocket created only a minimal disruption, for soon the intertwining strands of mist averaged a hundred yards in diameter. "Can't we avoid them?" asked Flash. "Every time we pass through one, I can't see a blamed thing."

"Don't worry; the automatic pilot sees better than we can."

As they broke through an especially large strand into the verdant skies, Flash saw Arboria for the first time. Tremendous roots and limbs tapering into nothingness rose from the light green fog screening the moon. The realization of their size numbed Flash. They were like the legs of gigantic dead spiders, somehow trapped in an eternal milky liquid.

Flash stared at a weaving tan root with green veins as they descended into the thick fog which seemed to cling to their flier like an ineffective adhesive. Their instruments showed them to be nearing their landing site, and the fog quickly became thicker and more tenacious. Flash gave Aura a questioning look.

Aura shook her head to demonstrate her mystification. "The fog's usually not so bad at this time of the year."

"How far to the landing pad?"

"Six-point-four. I'll just drop the flaps a little." She smiled with wide eyes, genuinely amused, when Flash touched her wrist to prevent her from manipulating the controls. "Trust me." She flicked a switch.

The electronic command could not have been completely transmitted to the flaps when the flier lurched and there was a scraping that sounded as if its underbelly was being torn off. The engines coughed; parts ground into one another; a shower of red and yellow sparks flew from a console to Flash's left.

Not again! thought Flash. "Pull 'er up!"

But it was already too late. Branches snapped loudly in quick succession; one cracked the window in front of Aura before it broke; she covered her face and screamed. The flier grazed one huge trunk only to graze another; though its fall was gradually slowing, it was being battered around by nature's indifferent creations as if it was a rubber ball that had been dropped from the limbs above the green fog. Flash's seat belt and shoulder strap threatened to tear through his uniform as he bounced in his seat.

Suddenly the flier smacked head on into a trunk, throwing Flash and Aura then backward, as it careened into thick heavy vines. The flier rose and fell for several minutes like a yo-yo; the vines had

caught it. When it finally ceased moving, Flash, pale and out of breath, smiled weakly at Aura. “Trust you, huh?”

Interlude

At first the people of Earth failed to realize that their way of life, not to mention their very planet, was at the mercy of powerful forces originating in a cosmic whirlpool at the crossroads of time and space. They took the heat waves, thunderstorms, tornadoes, tidal waves, earthquakes, and atmospheric disturbances in stride; these events had been occurring throughout the millenniums and were nothing to get too excited about. (However, even the long-lived President of the Yogurt Consumption Union could not recall the time when they had happened all at once.)

The scientific fraternity began to notice some truly unusual phenomena; membership in the Charles Fort Society boomed. Hordes of deceased white mice rained on Mobile, Alabama. The residents of a small Canadian fishing village awoke one morning to find the streets covered with a sticky black goo. A volcano erupted magnificently in Siberia—where three weeks before there had been no volcano! The Amazon River froze over during a blizzard. Half a million crows descended upon Paris and waged a vicious war against the pigeon population. Every leaf in Southern Africa withered and died, but the grass grew tall and strong, choking the countryside. Most perplexing, in the eyes of the layman, was that the birthrate in Japan had dropped dramatically.

The most useful accomplishment of these events was the selling of newspapers; circulation rose to record heights even as television ratings soared. But the world waited for the Reverend Bernard P. Johnson to put the proper perspective on matters. One sunny morning, as he sat in the kitchen reading a newspaper article on Palestinian terrorists machine gunning the marauding magic mushrooms springing up throughout the Middle East, he said to his wife, “You know, if I didn’t know better—and I don’t, because the Lord hasn’t been speaking to me lately—I’d say Judgment Day was upon us.”

That started his wife to thinking, and pretty soon the rumors were flying thick and fast all over the world.

9

Zarkov's Treachery

IMMEDIATELY after Ming instructed Klytus to indoctrinate Zarkov, he ordered the execution of the Minister of Propaganda. It was but a whim, an eminently satisfactory one, Ming decided as he watched the prolonged ritual. The minister's screams were loud and anguished, and he implored the Celestial One for mercy. "I fear the tack will not be successful a second time," Ming replied, savoring the minister's groans. "A pity; if you'd been more original, We might have been moved. As it is . . . Well, we shall spend a few moments in your honor, reflecting on the truths to be learned from your death. It is odd, isn't it, that the old, who have given what they had to give and who should be overjoyed to make way for the young, are the most regretful when departing the shadowed stage; instead, they should readily accept their fate, with a grace that will cause their souls to radiate contentment on their final journey."

The minister's only coherent answer was an ear-splitting scream, but Ming had expected that.

The execution merely whetted Ming's appetite for the sexual conquest of the Earth woman. Regardless of his words to his daughter (which apparently had surprised both of them equally), he had not anticipated the obtainment of a royal prerogative since he had ascended the throne over his father's mangled corpse. Never before had he encountered a woman with this Arden's sexual potential. *Must be something in Terran water,* he deduced as he entered the sensory deprivation chamber where he habitually meditated before releasing his lustful self upon some fortunate female flesh.

Lying horizontally above the floor, suspended by antigravity magnetic beams, Ming heard only his breathing and his heartbeat. His eyes were open, but they saw only blackness; when he closed them, he saw red and gray shadings, and he searched for pictures whose only reality was in imagination. Soon he saw torrents of blood, the screams of the dying throughout the eons, the futility of all human ideals and accomplishments. There was but the sensation of the moment to live for, since ultimately all monuments—whether poems or statues—would be less than dust. Then Ming perceived the essence of the

cosmic whirlpool; he touched the moments of the past and future; he had reached the eternal parts of his soul. Planets slowly, majestically moved in the black depths of space. Disruptions in the ether revealed unfathomable dimensions and impossible destinations. Ming the Merciless felt valuable insights verging on forbidden knowledge merge with his soul. For moments which stretched until time was a meaningless concept, Ming lay floating, experiencing the peace his turbulent emotions denied him, discovering the nuances of existence overwhelmed by his burdensome ennui. Finally, his spirit was tainted by the cravings of his body; his desire for Arden distracted him from oneness, divided his concept of self into many pieces. Yet this time Ming was not disappointed that his insights had fled, leaving him essentially unchanged for all his mystical experience. Quite inexplicably, his sexual desire did not seem unclean in comparison to his meditations. In fact, there was something supernaturally pure about his cravings, as if they had become an ideal as lofty as achieving permanent communion with the universe.

Acting upon another whim, Ming prepared his appearance. He bathed in a pool with mineral water imported from a prehistoric spring of an alternate universe. The incense mimicked the fragrance of crystals thrown onto the planet by the cosmic whirlpool a thousand years ago. (The crystals had long since been lost, but their fragrance lingered on.) Lobotomized eunuchs, their hungers unable to taint his, dried him with electronic equipment that blew heated, filtered air. He dressed himself in his finest red robes, concealing in the pockets various devices which would increase the pleasure.

The door providing access to his bedroom dilated open silently. His hands were in his sleeves, ensuring that the Earth woman would not see him tremble; he must be ever neutral, ever on guard with this one (perhaps a reason why she excited him so). He noted with satisfaction that she was clad in white, as he had wished. She lay on her stomach, facing away from him, her eyes fixed upon some point in her imagination.

He approached, striving to remain perfectly silent as he stepped on the silk sheets. His efforts partially successful, he knelt and touched her.

Startled, the woman moaned and looked up at him.

Ming exclaimed, “By the hands of the gods, I’ve been foiled by a mere Earthling!”

For the woman in white was a slave girl!

Wearing the shimmering gold gown she had procured from the slave

girl, Dale Arden tiptoed down a corridor. Her exhilaration at having escaped Ming's clammy clutches, for however long, threatened to make her light-headed, and she concentrated on listening for evidence of pursuit. Holding the slave girl's high heels by their straps, she was thankful the silken material provided her with ample freedom of movement, that Ming's women did not wear tightly fitting dresses or some other equally inconvenient fashion.

Dale placed her hand over her heart and ceased breathing as she heard the approach of a red-robed guard, clothed like the leader of the squad which had brought her and her friends to the castle.

She set down the shoes near a partition, one of several which had been placed in the intersection of hallways for no reason she could discern. Nevertheless, she was thankful for the partition's existence. For she circled about it while the guard stared at her shoes and then glanced about, in search of the owner, with a robotic demeanor.

"Hey!" Dale shouted.

Hefting his weapon, the guard walked beside the partition. Before he saw her, before he made his turn, Dale stuck out her foot and tripped him.

The guard landed heavily, with an outburst of escaping breath and the clanging of metal parts. Dale knelt and performed a brutal karate chop on the nape of his neck. Thankful that the guard had slumped into unconsciousness (and that she had not broken her hand on a steel plate), she picked up his weapon and glanced around the partition.

Two more red-robed guards approached.

Forced to reveal herself, Dale moved away from concealment and fired a laser blast at the second guard. Sparks flew and yellow smoke erupted from his red robe; he staggered backward and collapsed against the wall.

Meanwhile, as she was considering whether she should be shocked or elated at her violent victory, the foremost guard shot her weapon from her hand. She realized instantly that her only hope lay in retrieving the weapon of the man she had felled. As the guard fired a series of blasts at her, she turned a cartwheel in the direction toward her salvation. A blast passed between her legs during the instant she stood upright on her hands.

Dale grabbed the weapon and fired pointblank at the guard. Blood and metal shavings spilled from the opening in his stomach.

Another guard, his presence given away by noises which may have indicated he was thinking, approached.

They played a game of hide-and-seek around the partition, a game

which abruptly ended as Dale struck the guard on the upper spine with the butt of her weapon. Gears shifted unmercifully, their screeching noises muffled by his body. Stepping around him, Dale struck him in the stomach. He fell as if he had dropped ten stories.

Sickened, resisting the urge to vomit in reaction to the suffering she had wrought, Dale retrieved the slave girl's shoes and ran away from the intersection.

Though Klytus's twelve monitors were equipped with skin, digestive systems, respiratory systems, and all the other details normally associated with humanity, they were identical; each round, hairless head lacking a characteristic enabling the casual onlooker to distinguish one from the. rest. Each monitor had a flabby torso and skinny legs. Wearing black uniforms and thick black ocular devices over their eyes, they worked quickly, methodically, never varying their mutual rhythm. They constantly murmured their reports, describing their actions as they performed them. They sat on both sides of a long console, equipped with screens that received the images from the ocular devices, which in their turn were hooked up to all the bugs in the castle and city, including communicators transplanted into the brains of spies.

His sheathed hands behind his back, Klytus paced back and forth behind the monitors, as was ever his habit when the prey had aroused Ming's personal interest. He halted and spun on his heels, clenching his fist, as a monitor finally said, "Sire, this unworthy slug desires to please you through his tidings."

Klytus did not listen to the monitor's words. He watched an image of Dale moving aimlessly through the corridors. She paused to slip on her shoes. "What sector did you say?" Klytus asked.

"Section 409 Beta."

Kala emerged from the shadowed corner. During the search she had withdrawn into the background, forcing Klytus to assume the tedious responsibilities of its operation; now that a satisfactory report to Ming was imminent, she would stand by his side. She slapped her whip on her thigh. "Shall we send a globe after Arden?" she asked briskly, deflecting Klytus's attention to the affairs of state before he devoted a moment to their personal rivalries. (In truth, this strategy had been effective for so many years Klytus had ceased to notice it.)

Rubbing his fingers together as if his metal gloves had become as comfortable to him as a luxurious fiber, Klytus replied, "No, my dear, His Majesty has commanded us to curtail expenditures in order to reduce the staggering inflation stagnating the economy. Our Emperor

does not like for his children to be unhappy. So, instead, I propose another measure," he continued, his tone subtly altering as only Kala could know, as if he was offering her a chalice of white wine. "Merely that we should send guards after her. We should always withhold the use of machinery whenever possible; men are so much cheaper."

"Might I suggest only one agent then, one whom she would gladly follow . . . to wherever he might lead her?"

"I understand," said Klytus. "You have just slashed this operation's budget by a third." He turned to a monitor. "Activate Agent Zarkov."

Kala pursed her lips so she would not smile. She would make certain Ming knew who thought of *that* little idea.

As Dale ran through a narrow corridor with dimly lit portions spaced between long blocks of pitch darkness, she fought off the sensation that, instead of running (aimlessly) toward an exit, she was somehow traveling deeper into the castle. She recalled its size. During her flight she had passed many doors, sometimes heard voices, but she saw no one. She imagined whole families, their lines stretching back through the centuries, spending their entire histories within this labyrinth. Once she laughed at herself, thinking once again of her father's pulp stories, wherein men in machines bore through the ground until they reached the prehistoric center of the Earth, inhabitated by cavemen, mammoths, and dinosaurs. What would she find when she reached the core of the castle?

She approached an intersection cautiously. When she saw someone around a corner, she became too frozen with fear to turn and run. The same kind of fear had beset her when Flash first communicated with her via telepathy. However, the man's relaxed posture and friendly smile convinced her. She ran to him. She embraced him. "Zarkov! I never thought I'd say this, but you're a sight for sore eyes, you zany altruist!"

"Easy, girl. Rest a minute."

Moving away from him due to his sexist remark, Dale observed him with suspicion. There was a glassiness in his eyes, as if something important had been snuffed out. "We can't rest," she said, anticipating his expression when she told him the astounding news. "We've got to get out of here and join up with Flash!"

Zarkov blinked several times, then his eyes expanded wide open as if he was emerging from an opium dream. "Flash is alive?" he asked hoarsely. His eyes darted about with a quickness that filled Dale with relief. "That's incredible! Almost . . . *unbelievable!"* He roughly grabbed her arm. "How do you know? You must tell me!"

Wrenching herself from his grip, she nevertheless forgave him his understandable enthusiasm. “I talked to him through a telepathic communicator of some kind. He’s on his way to the moon of Arboria to get some help.”

Zarkov rubbed his beard. He shook his head. “Just incredible,” he whispered.

“If we stay in these corridors much longer, we’re certain to be captured! What will we do?”

Zarkov placed his forefinger on his pursed lips. “Let me think a moment,” he mumbled, and scowled.

Dale wondered if Zarkov was applying all his mental capacities to the problem of their escape or if he was only pretending he was. From her previous experiences with men of extraordinary intellectual achievements, she knew it was sometimes impossible to tell. Especially in a domestic situation!

Zarkov abruptly raised his eyebrows. “Follow me. I think I can find a safe way out.”

She looked away from him and became dizzy, putting her hand on his shoulder only because he was the nearest support. She feared she lacked the courage to play the game.

Actually, she had no choice.

“Which way?” she asked, hoping to draw him out. “I’ve been all over this frigging place . . . !”

“Congratulations, my girl,” he said tensely, with genuine respect. “You curse with the self-assurance of a man, an attribute I guarantee you’ll appreciate as life relentlessly marches on. No questions, dear; there’s no time. Just—follow me!”

As he led her by the hand through the maze of corridors, she became increasingly astounded at how they had managed to avoid the castle’s teeming population. They didn’t even see a servant. Dale wondered just who Zarkov had managed to fool. Had he fooled his brainwashers? Or was he fooling her, leading her into the worst trap of all?

Klytus and Kala saw none of Ming’s surroundings as they viewed him in the screen above them. The communicator was propped at an angle that required them to be constantly looking up at him. They dared not look away or relax their necks. They would not commit such a grievous—hence, deadly—insult.

“I have located Dale Arden, Your Majesty,” said Klytus. “She is under the guidance of Agent Zarkov.”

Ming raised his eyebrow; he caressed his mouth, his long fingernails brushing his mustache. “Zarkov, eh?” His smile revealed a rare glimpse of genuine merriment. “A masterstroke! We recognize the hand of Kala in this.” The serpentine eyes peered down at her.

Kala nodded and smiled . . . just a little.

“Klytus, your subordinate has pleased Us. We are correct, are We not, in assuming it was her suggestion?”

“Of course, you are correct, Sire,” said Klytus without the faintest trace of rancor. “I thought it a bold, daring maneuver, certain to become a high point of the historical records of your august reign, regardless of the story’s ending, whether it be gay—or tragic. Do you not agree, Most Celestial One?”

With an effort, Kala refrained from biting her lower lip. Klytus had thrust the entire responsibility onto her shoulders. She smiled weakly. “I confess, Sire, my only intent was to save expense . . .”

“Of course, of course, my dear,” said Ming, chiding her good-naturedly. “You must understand, We truly admire an underling who freely risks so much for the good of the realm.”

So the matter being thus settled, Klytus boldly interrupted Ming. “I must also report that Flash Gordon is still alive!”

Ming could not have been more startled if Klytus had slapped him with a dead lizard. All his façades dropped at once, exposing a seething morass of anger. Now Klytus and Kala were faced with a mutual task: deflecting the ruthless temper of Ming the Merciless.

Kala spoke up. “Gordon was revived by a *traitor* who spirited him from the city. We know this much from the Earth woman.”

Ming snarled from the screen. *“Who was the traitor?”*

“I have my suspicions,” said Klytus; his subtle lightness of tone was as daring as it was confident. “We request authority to pursue them in our own way.”

“Stop at nothing.”

“Regardless of the expense?”

“Of course, you sniveling imbecile!”

“No matter to whom the trail leads?” asked Klytus with a blandness so rife with connotations that it frightened Kala.

“Stop at nothing!”

Flash and Aura climbed the vines holding the flier until they reached the branch from which the vines hung. Climbing the branch was more difficult; its diameter was forty yards. However, the hardship was

mitigated by the ample holds provided by chips of bark. Breathless and weary, still stunned by the crash, they began making their way toward Prince Barin's forest. Aura immediately relieved Flash of his worst fears when she stated she was familiar with the area. His mind on other matters, Flash only gradually assimilated information on the new environment. Throughout the day he had acted, but had not thought, immersing his soul into his corporal self to a degree he had not attained since his boyhood hours spent throwing a football through a tire. Despite the harrowing stakes of the game, he had never felt so whole.

Then, as his motions became mechanical and he had no choice but to leave the trailblazing to Aura, he suffered selfdoubts, and he wondered if the day's events were a hallucination. The only mind-expanding drug Flash had ever taken was the peyote he had eaten during a winter spent as the disciple of an Amerind medicine man, but the visions had never been anything like this. He had fallen hopelessly in love, been condemned to death by a mad monarch, and escaped execution through fortunate circumstances—all in one day! Not to mention that he had traveled an incalculable number of miles across the cosmos. *And* that the existence of Earth was in jeopardy. Absorbing all this in twelve hours required a definite effort on Flash's part.

Now he had to adjust to the sight of Arboria.

The trees were miles high; Flash and Aura walked on branches two miles from the ground. Save for white patches of light, the dense foliage shut out the visual evidence of the cosmic whirlpool. Flash felt like he had plummeted into a tableau in close contact with the essence of the life-giving forces. Dense green fog concealed the ground; green droplets formed on the tremendous leaves. The forest was a wet and steamy closed system. It was quiet, motionless. The struggle for life and death among the plants was prolonged and resolute. From what Flash had seen of Barin and his people, he was certain that beneath the peaceful tableau, the struggle was quick and final.

Flash's musings had taken him to grimmer, more forebidding spheres when the sullen silence was broken by a dimly heard chant. The music totally mystified him; it sounded like a combination of reggae and a Bach cantata, with just a touch of soul rock. As Flash and Aura altered direction by crossing upward at intersecting branches, the chant became louder; the drums and other percussive instruments became more frenzied; the singers clapped their hands at a counterpointing rhythm, thus adding another layer of sound to the sparse, repetitious arrangement. Flash assumed some sort of ceremony was transpiring. He disliked Aura's wide smile and her twitching lip.

He wanted to ignore her completely, following her lead as if she was no more than a guide. But the brief glimpses of her beautiful face mesmerized him. Her smile bordered on childhood innocence.

As they broke through a thick shaft of blinding light descending from the foliage, they saw a wooden bridge, which looked to have been constructed by master craftsmen using sophisticated tools, meeting their walkway (which soon ended against a gigantic trunk). The bridge met another, and another, and soon they walked through a small village comprised of several boardwalks and treehouses, using the forest itself as a base. The boardwalks were empty. No one peered through the treehouse openings. They reached the underdeveloped village borders, where the trunks were thinnest, arriving at a treehouse built upon four intersecting boardwalks. A tree grew through the shack's roof. By now Flash had wondered about the absence of female singers; spying a group of green-clad Tree Men through an opening, he suspected that women were not permitted within a designated radius while this very private, masculine ceremony was being performed. The Tree Men's eyes were closed and their heads bobbed to the beat; they were intensely involved.

"It's their sacred temple," Aura volunteered. "A young man is being initiated." Her anticipation was keen.

"What do I do?" asked an awed Flash.

"We must hide outside until it's over, but in the meantime, let's climb on that branch over there and watch!"

In the center of the temple, a hollow stump protruded through the floor. Standing about it were an aged priest in green robes, a young Tree Man, and Prince Barin. The blond, gaunt-faced youth facing the priest had just reached the latter teen years. The chanting suddenly dropped, becoming less frenzied and more solemn, and the youth said, "I am of age now, Green Father. I ask for the test of manhood."

The old priest croaked, "Choose your passage into this world—or the next! May Arbor guide you!" He coughed and tapped his fist on his chest. The chanting ceased. The priest stuck his staff deep into the stump, briskly stabbing and poking. A muffled roar, followed by a high-pitched hissing, resounded from the interior; the stump vibrated slightly from the shiftings and onslaughts of the creature within.

The youth brought up his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow; he then thought better of it, rubbing his chin to conceal the motion's original intent. Trembling, he held his fist over an open stub of the stump.

He thrust his arm in it up to the shoulder.

He held his arm inside. He bit his upper lip. The youth twice

belatedly stifled outcries of fear. But no man in the temple, not even Barin or the priest, shook his head to express shame over the youth's behavior. Their faces were, instead, grim and concerned. They considered his courage admirable merely for performing the deed, though they obviously expected it of him.

The youth tentatively smiled and began to remove his arm. He felt that he had survived the danger, that the worst of his fear was over with. The creature roared and hissed. The youth uttered a sharp cry and yanked out his arm. Holding his hand tightly about the wrist, he stared disbelieving at the green pus seeping into his wound, pus that had overspilled from the creature's stinger.

The youth knelt before his Prince. "Send me on my way! Spare me the madness!"

No willingness registered itself on Barin's face as he stated simply, "I will."

Barin snapped his fingers. As he took off his gloves and tucked them into his belt, two men approached. The foremost man poured a chalice of water over Barin's hands; the second man patted them dry with a green towel. The Prince faced the kneeling, silently pleading youth. His fingers trembling (with nervousness? anticipation?), he withdrew his sword. He stared at the blade. He thrust it into the youth's breast, running it through his back.

After Barin had wrenched the blade out, the youth fell to the floor, his forehead striking the wood with a hollow thud. His hands caressed his Prince's boots. "Thank you," he whispered. And then he expired.

Aura laughed softly and moved out of hiding.

Barin looked through the opening. He smiled.

Aura indicated that Flash remain out of sight. She ran into Barin's arms on the boardwalk outside the temple. They stared intently at one another. "That was extremely moving," said Aura.

"You came!" Barin breathed.

"I do sometimes keep a promise."

"We'll have a feast!"

"Not for me, thanks," she said, briefly touching the tip of his nose. "I must return to the castle before I'm missed."

Barin was crestfallen. "Then why did you come?"

"I've brought you a present," replied Aura teasingly. She looked toward the forest and called out, "Flash!"

Flash stepped onto the boardwalk. Cocking his thumb, he pointed with his forefinger toward the foliage above. "Hi!"

Barin's mouth moved several times before he managed to say, "You were executed."

"I saved him," Aura said. "I want you to keep him for me until my father has had his way with Dale Arden."

Stunned, Flash recoiled from them. "My God! Does anyone ever trust you twice?" he yelled at Aura. "No wonder I wasn't able to reach your decent core. There is no decent core!"

"I'll keep Gordon all right! In my larder with the rest of the hanging meat!" exclaimed Barin. Following his signal, several Tree Men rushed toward Flash and circled him with a row of naked blades.

"No! I forbid it!" Aura said, forcibly preventing Barin from advancing upon his captive. "If you kill Flash, we'll never know another night of mutual ecstasy again!"

Barin ceased all resistance.

Aura drew him closer, so that neither Flash nor the Tree Men could hear their words. "What danger is there? Everyone thinks he's dead. I promise I'll take him to Cytheria next week."

"Harboring a fugitive from Ming is treason!"

"Not if it isn't discovered!"

"It will be," said Barin grimly. "You're too isolated, you don't know the effect of his little defiance on the people. Already the story is spreading throughout the moons. People strive to remain neutral, neither approving nor disapproving, for they no longer know friend from foe—not that it's ever been easy. They realize this, however: Gordon's defiance wasn't an act of desperate bravado like that of Prince Thun. No, it was an act resulting from a perpetual state of will, powered by an inner strength born of an innate courage of convictions. If other Americans are like him, they're the most dangerous breed of men in the cosmos. Gordon's brave death has inspired people to contemplate the value of their honor, Aura. What the end of it may be, no one can say. But wisemen say this, Princess, they say that once the concept of rebellion is born, its actuality is the sole certainty. You'll never be able to hide Gordon. Not on Cytheria or anywhere! Never!"

"We'll see about that. You just keep him here. Your men will never betray you."

Barin rubbed his cheeks. "Every man has his price. I know I do."

Aura ran her finger over his collar. "Hiding Flash isn't so much if you really love me."

"You're asking me to play with fire."

She grinned. "Of course I am. Would I make love to a man who

wouldn't?"

Across the blazing crimson sky of the city of Mongo flew a sky cycle, a round, finned disc with enough standing room for two people behind the control banks. Peasants on mountainsides where they could easily view the cycle passengers were confused about their appearances. The woman wore the clothing of a slave girl and the man wore a costume like nothing they had ever seen. The peasants would have been dumbfounded if they had heard the man's song: "Won't Get Fooled Again."

Dale got Zarkov's attention by yanking his jacket at the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Zarkov laughed. "Never better. I just realized we're sure to win. We're stronger than a hundred Mings."

"Ha! What makes you think so?"

"They placed me under a fiendishly clever device back there; they tried to brainwash me. They didn't realize I had attended More Science High at the height of the red scare during the fabulous fifties. The teaching staff knew the mightiest weapons of the Cold War were the minds of tomorrow's scientists, and so they familiarized us with all methods of brainwashing. Klytus and Kala tried to wipe out my memory—dare I utter such an obscenity—they tried to *dehumanize* me and turn me into a Mongian agent. They thought they had succeeded, ha! ha!" Zarkov's laughter was lusty and bold.

"Goodness, Doctor, how did you trick them?"

"Well, at first I didn't. Klytus and Kala do know their way around a fiendishly clever device. For a while it looked like they were going to strip my memory like a coal mine. But can you guess why they failed, Dale?"

"If I could, I wouldn't have asked you."

"As I was succumbing to that strange device, I began to recite from the bountiful works of mankind—Shakespeare, the Talmud, the formulas of Einstein, *Childhood's End,* anything I could remember. Even a Beatles song. I think it was 'Revolution.' It armored me. Klytus couldn't take my mind away. He didn't know it's impossible to beat the human spirit!"

"That's terrific. Now how are we going to rescue Earth and Flash, not necessarily in that order?"

"Though I wasn't programmed, all the information we need was planted into my mind, just as all the routes out of the castle and the paths of the patrols had been planted. I'll calculate our rescue mission

the same way I calculated our escape route."

"I've just picked up some information myself," said Dale.

"What?"

"Optimism is a six-letter word spelled Z-a-r-k-o-v!"

The Earth scientist laughed and leaned the sky cycle to the left. "There must be a happiness shelter around here somewhere."

Suddenly, a dark shadow fell over them. Dale looked up and screamed as a Hawk Man lifted her from the cycle. As another Hawk Man lifted Zarkov, leaving the cycle to crash spectacularly against a mountainside, Dale screamed at the scientist, "Well, just don't shrug, damn it! Do something!"

Night had unexpectedly fallen once again, and as Mongian meteorologists lamented the unpredictable pranks of the universe to their superiors, Aura landed her damaged flier upon its private pad on the docks. While a tractor beam on Arboria had stabilized the flier, the Tree Men had cut it from the vines and guided it to the nearest takeoff site; it had sustained damage in the crash but remained able to fly. Aura was pleased to note that it still flew smoothly through the turbulent air currents. However, as she admitted to herself, her mind was preoccupied, and she simply might not have noticed the jolts.

Standing on the edge of the pad, Aura paused to appreciate the crisscrossing, multicolored spotlights probing the darkness. She felt warm and lonely; emptiness and ennui beset her as she yearned for Flash, for Barin, for the doctor, for any number of men she approved of. Then she lowered her eyes and saw Klytus before her. Behind him stood three black-clad soldiers.

"Good evening, Princess," said Klytus neutrally. "Did you have a good flight from Arboria?"

"Arboria?" Aura laughed weakly. "I've just been flying around checking out my instruments."

As she moved past Klytus, he gestured toward her. "Seize her!" For once, his voice expressed arrogance.

Flash faced Barin through a wooden cage suspended by vines hung by a pulley system. With him inside were a bleeding Frigian and a Hawk Man whose rotting bandages were crusted with dried blood. Three Lizard Men in good health pawed ineffectually at the wood bars. The stench of the cage and prisoners made it difficult for Flash to breathe.

Barin glared at the Earthling with poorly concealed hatred. He

fingered the switch of his crossbow, somehow resisting his murderous urge.

“Prince, I’m not your enemy,” Flash said calmly. “Ming is. You know it yourself. Ming’s the enemy of every living creature in this system. Come on, Barin, what do you say? Let’s team up and fight him! Why, with a good offensive strategy, we can put him on the run in no time at all!”

But Barin strode away as if his prisoner’s words were inconsequential raindrops. “Lower them into the swamp!” he said to the Tree Man operating the pulley system.

10

Beyond Ming's Law

FOR most of the time Aura was sedated. Engulfed in blackness, she swam in and out of consciousness. She was unable to open her eyes. The blackness swirled her in pain. She awoke from nightmares only to endure the anguish she had fled. Occasionally, she determined she lay on a metal table, her ankles and wrists clamped down tightly; she never remembered for long. At first, she could not decide if the pain was enjoyable; however, its gradual but persistent growth eventually terrified her. Never before had immediacy been so overwhelming, reducing her sense of identity to a microcosm.

It stands to reason that under such circumstances, time was meaningless. Aura did not know how long she had endured the pain when she became aware of a smug Kala and a condescending Klytus standing over her. She lay on a metallic table coated with gold finish, her wrists and ankles imprisoned by gold, mechanical, disembodied hands. The room, for its space, contained only instruments of torture.

Klytus ran his sheathed hand down her naked back. Her jumpsuit had been torn into shreds during the procedure; the sole intact section, really, was that over her stomach, and it was so drenched in her perspiration that it stuck to the table. "Your lover Barin is harboring Gordon in Arboria, is he not?"

"Is your hand sterilized?"

Klytus moved as if to slap her. She squinted, attempting to hide her face behind her arm in anticipation of the blow, but his hand merely trembled before he regained control of himself.

"No," said Aura meekly, belatedly answering him, knowing she was on the verge of breaking.

A red light on the table to her left glowed.

"This lying is a waste of time," said Klytus.

Kala placed her hand on Aura's cheek; her black leather glove was smooth and soft. "You left with a pilot and returned alone. Wasn't he Gordon in disguise?"

"No!"

Kala smiled. "Then who was he?" She ignored the glowing red light.

“Just a young pilot. Believe me, he’s nobody important. When I rejected his clumsy advances, he declared he couldn’t live without me. Before I could stop him, he opened the hatch and hurled himself onto the rocks below.”

Kala stared at her prisoner. Then she straightened, placed her hands on her hips, closed her eyes, and laughed. Her ecstatic laughter echoed in Aura’s ears long after the whip stung the air. Its tips cut deeply into the bared back, breaking open scabs and creating at least one fresh streak. For the first time since the procedure began, Aura felt drops of her blood run down her side and stomach, forming a tiny pool on the table. Kala struck Aura until Klytus impatiently gestured for it to end.

“Whom do you imagine you are protecting?” asked Klytus. “The doctor who helped you revive Gordon? We know he’s another lover of yours . . .”

“You’ve gone mad!” exclaimed Aura.

Klytus spoke into a communicating device in his hand. “This is General Klytus. Seize Doctor Lem on suspicion of treason. Prepare him for torture.”

Kala slapped her bloody whip against her thigh. “Confess and we’ll stop the torture. We don’t want to hurt you. We don’t like doing this at all!” She drew out these last words with exquisite pleasure as she prepared to bring the whip down on Aura’s bloodied back once again. Klytus caught her arm.

“Never!” said Aura. “Do your worst! I can stand it! Someday I’ll laugh about this—and you’ll both be dead!”

“We’ll see about that,” replied Klytus. “Bring me the Bore Worms, Kala.”

Several seconds elapsed before Aura found her voice. *“No! Not the Bore Worms!”*

“I admit their method of entry is a trifle messy, not to mention undignified,” said Klytus. “But those who have endured Bore Worms have said the pain caused when they begin devouring the colon is among the most excruciating in the cosmos. From what I’ve been able to ascertain of your likes and dislikes down through the years, I should think you’d be looking forward to this.”

When Kala stood before her, holding a large pair of tweezers and a jar filled with the squirming white worms, Aura screamed, “I’m a Princess of the Blood, Klytus. My father will have your head for this! I swear! He’ll execute you and your entire perverted secret police force! I demand to see him!”

"With pleasure," answered Klytus nonchalantly. He touched a button on the table console.

A section of the chamber wall before Aura dissolved into blackness. A hologram of Ming the Merciless appeared; he stood sipping a drink. He had been watching the entire procedure.

"The traitor is close to confessing, Your Majesty," said Klytus. "Should we stop the torture?"

Ming dipped a fruit into the chalice. "No."

Since the women were not due back to the village for another two days, Prince Barin celebrated the capture of Flash Gordon in the sole method remaining to him. That is to say, he got plastered. Dreamy eyed, he sat swaying on a branch, his elbow across his knee and his back propped against a trunk rubbed smooth by generations of drunken Tree Men. Fico, a gaunt minstrel with sharp canine teeth (the result of radioactive contamination on his mother's side), reclined on a smaller branch, kicked off his boots, and played a panpipe. The spirits had ensnared his, and he was open to communication from the celestial spheres. Normally, his music took Barin on a similar, though much more melancholy, journey, but today the Prince could not prevent his mind from dwelling on the mundane. "This damnable loyalty of mine—what is it?" Barin stared at the minstrel as he contemplated his next words. It took him a few moments, but he finally said, "Why is it that I'm reluctant to put aside my personal hatred for that Earthling who keeps upstaging me? Why do I not heed his words and join him in the fight against our mutual oppressor?"

Lowering his panpipe, Fico raised his eyebrows. "Doesn't the Princess Aura and her apparent infatuation with this primitive have something to do with it?"

Barin laughed and waved both his hands. "Oh, she may be Ming's daughter and the heir to his throne, but I don't care with *whom* or how many times she does it. She's only a woman and there're plenty of them."

"Too many space hounds in the void, eh, Prince?"

"Exactly."

But Fico knew better. He played a few random notes. "No, there must be some other reason why I'm loyal to Ming," said Barin, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it's a disease of your blood, my Prince. Remember that as a child, you saw your father executed for rebelling against the Emperor. Naturally, you prize loyalty. Who the hell wants to die that

way? But the question is: Is your loyalty to Ming the stronger, or is it your hatred of Flash Gordon?"

Barin leaped up, knocking over his flagon. "I'll kill Gordon now!"

"And lose Princess Aura forever?" asked Fico, setting the flagon right without looking away from Barin. "There's a better way. Let me tell you how to dispose of Gordon so that Ming might be satisfied, and how to keep faith with the Princess too."

* * *

Though the surface of the dank swamp was calm, a continuous undertow pulled the prisoners under. Only a small level portion of the cage was above the surface, forcing the prisoners to hold on to the wooden bars. At first Flash believed the situation would not depress his spirits. He spent his initial minutes in the cage accepting the tremendous alteration which had come over his life; the thought of escape could wait . . . briefly. Once he had believed himself master of his destiny; because he had, within limits, shaped his life to his own ends, he had believed all men possessed similar powers, and thus was unsympathetic to several important precepts of twentieth-century philosophy. However, blind circumstance (or perhaps mysterious, more ethereal forces) had shown him otherwise. His previous achievements had been rendered meaningless phantoms as he vainly attempted to reassert a minimal control over his life. At least he now expected the unexpected. He resolved he would fight for his life—against each new danger the Mongian system threw at him. And he would rescue his friends; important philosophical precepts were inconsequential in light of his stirred emotions. His desire for Dale filled him with a saintly passion and worship; his concern for Dale and Zarkov, his fear for their fates, filled him with worry and despair. He accepted his emotional highs and lows; he did not care to think of his resolutions in terms of "going with the flow," due to the perpetual undertow weakening his grip on the cage, but the phrase did accurately mirror his conclusions. Now his mind was free to turn to thoughts of escape.

However . . .

He soon realized the undertow demanded all his attention. The seconds crawled by as he held on to the bars with all his strength. The hot swamp water, as much as his efforts, caused perspiration to flow from his face. He breathed through his mouth to minimize the odors—the green water, the debris and waste slowly gliding by, the rotting flesh of the Hawk Man also held captive. Gangrene had set in, and the poor fellow was losing strength quickly. Not that the Frigian was doing much better; his wound constantly oozed blood and pus. Flash

found himself supporting the pair. After a time he did not think of escape; all his concentration was centered on holding his companions and keeping his free hand wrapped around a bar. The Hawk Man's arms encircled his neck, and the Frigian was limp in his embrace. The hissing Lizard Men occasionally tried to usurp the area, but the trio managed to kick away and otherwise intimidate the cowardly creatures.

It was difficult to see. Eerie phosphorescent plants provided this section of the swamp with a dim lighting barely able to penetrate the wisps of green fog. Flash glimpsed huge tree trunks not twenty yards away; sometimes he saw the surface break as an Arborian creature passed by; occasionally Tree Men above jeered at the prisoners. These were but impressions. Soon his entire universe was centered on the cage and his efforts to save his fellows from drowning

Perhaps they had been struggling together for an hour when the Frigian said weakly, "It's no use. I can't hold on."

"Never say die," Flash replied sternly.

"I must. My suffering must end so I may be reborn." The Frigian pushed himself away before Flash could prevent it. He sank, hardly causing a ripple in the smooth green surface.

Flash moved to go after him, then remembered the dying Hawk Man around his neck. He hesitated. Even if he managed to save the Frigian, the Hawk Man would die. Perhaps it did not matter. Both the Mongians were on the verge of death anyway, and what difference—one way or the other—did a few moments of life make? Flash did not resist the white hatred welling up inside him and saturating his spirit.

Damn Barin!

Four Tree Men alighted on the cage, causing it to sink a few more inches beneath the surface. They had stepped from a platform controlled by a pulley system. Two of Barin's men held the arms of a gaunt man with sharp canines whose hands were bound behind him. The remaining Tree Man opened the hatch. He then kicked at Flash's face through the space between the bars, supposedly to discourage any foolhardy escape attempts.

They freed the prisoner's hands before they threw him through the opening and into the swamp. "Sleep well, you traitor," said one. "We'll pull out your heart in the morning!"

"Yes, if you live till morning!" said another.

The Tree Men stepped onto the platform and tugged on the ropes. They were soon lost behind the weak glow.

The new prisoner laughed.

"That's the spirit," said Flash. "There's always hope."

"Better than hope," said Fico the minstrel. "I stole a key to this cage." He held it before Flash's face. "We'll need weapons to cross the swamp. They're stored in the temple. Will you climb up with me?"

"Damn straight I will!" Flash helped the Hawk Man get the best grip possible on the bars. Just before he and Fico opened the cage, he said, "Hold on, Hawk Man. We'll be back. I promise."

Angry that they had been prevented from escaping after the two left, the Lizard Men hissed and beat at the Hawk Man.

Prince Vultan felt the involuntary mating urges that signaled another three hours of irrational behavior and bawdy dancing just as soon as a female of his species succumbed to similar desires. As he held his dish to his mouth and picked up grain with his tongue, he was forced to admit today was a good time for mating. The skies were blue, the clouds were vivid white, and the Sky Palace shone with an utterly appealing dull luster. He set down the dish, plucked a few stray pieces of grain from his beard, and watched the procession of Hawk Girls carry the trays of dessert (pastries spiked with insects and grubs) to his men squatting on benches about the banquet tables. Would a Hawk Girl soon be overcome by the urges? Which lovely creature would the ineffable passions randomly select for him; with what creature would he spend a year of loving, cooing, and billing, discovering all sorts of unpleasant things about her personality (not to mention his own), only to have all emotional feeling between them evaporate into nothingness in a year's time? One day they would be soul mates; the next he would be Prince of the Hawk Men and she would be an underling; perhaps a mutual friendship would grow as the eggs hatched and they supervised the education and flight training of their little ones, but the passion would be gone forever, merely a dim memory barely illuminating his lonely nights as he waited for the unpredictable mating urges to return.

The banquet room was an open-aired circle, with partitions of silver curtains and columns of metal squares strung together, all of which were purely nonfunctional but which lent such an attractive element that Vultan insisted the area be cleaned of droppings and fumigated every day. The landing docks led directly to the banquet room, and it was here that Vultan received dignitaries (or, more likely, captives) from other moons of the Mongian system. In the center was a flat, silver disk separated from the remainder of the room by seven meters.

His rear shaking with pleasure and excitement, Luro (still thin, dark, and unruly) stood at the entrance to the dock. "Fortune has smiled

upon us!" he called. "Guess who Big Blue has brought us!" He pointed to the Hawk Men approaching in the sky.

Soon Dale and Zarkov, escorted by Hawk Men, entered. Dale smiled stiffly but sincerely. "Hi there, Prince Vultan! Remember us?"

Usually Vultan did not find mammals beautiful, but he thought in this case he would make an exception. "Indeed I do, my lovely!" he exclaimed. With a great laugh, he picked up Dale and set her down amidst the pastries on the table. Her high heels did not provide much footing on the slippery repast.

"We escaped from Ming's palace," said Zarkov. "We throw ourselves on your mercy and beg help."

"You escaped from the palace?" exclaimed Vultan. "That sounds like a terrific story. You must tell it to me sometime." As he spoke, he gestured for Luro to stand beside him. He whispered from the side of his mouth, "Call Ming. Tell him I'm ready to trade prisoners for my daughter Rima."

"Call him?" exclaimed Luro. He then realized it was imperative for him to lower his voice. "At this time? He's knocked off by now." Luro nervously nibbled at his shoulder. "You know how the Emperor prizes his spare time."

"Call him," said Vultan sternly, between his teeth.

"I agree this is important and I agree that he'll ask why he wasn't informed at once, but he'll order my execution before he even gives me a chance to tell him, and what's more, *he won't change his mind.* Don't you remember Scurvo? Ming agreed wholeheartedly that the Lizard Rebellion demanded his immediate personal attention, but he had Scurvo tortured anyway. Just for the hell of it. I suppose Ming thought it amusing or something. I don't really care. But I . . ."

"CALL HIM!" yelled Vultan, staring at his fists. His entire body trembled as he controlled his rage.

"You wouldn't," said Dale, getting off the table.

Zarkov stepped forward. "Vultan, listen, I understand you owe us nothing. All right, I can accept that. Still, and as a reasonable man you must concur with me, you can't make deals with a madman. I know what I'm talking about because we tried that back on Earth and it didn't work. You must destroy Ming before he destroys you."

Luro laughed. "That's easy for you to say. Ming's army outnumbers us ten to one, and they have superior hardwear. Our weapons need at least another year of preparation before we can fight."

Dale shrugged with a dignified air. "Humph. Ming's not unbeatable." She placed her arms on her hips and shook her

shoulders. “All his boys couldn’t even kill Flash.”

Vultan spit out a mouthful of grain. Walking onto the table and over a bench, he exclaimed, *“Gordon’s alive!”*

“Where?” asked Luro, scrambling behind his Prince.

“He’s in Arboria. Prince Barin is aiding him!” Hans Zarkov, Earth scientist, man of peace, held his fist before Vultan’s face. “I tell you—now’s the time to strike!”

In the laboratory where Zarkov had been “brainwashed,” next to the chamber where Aura had been tortured, Klytus gave a sealed scroll to Ming. “Here is the confession, Your Majesty.”

Ming curled his lip as he took it; he bounced it in his hand a few times. “Excellent, Klytus. A wonderful bout of torturing, delicately performed.”

The masked man bowed. “I am honored to have received such praise.”

Ming waved it off, as if to say “Of course.”

“But I’ve one question, if I may.”

Ming nodded.

“What of the traitoress? Should I proceed with the execution?”

Placing his hands behind his back, Ming sucked in his stomach and raised his shoulders; he nearly swaggered down the steps to the lower level. “No, I think a year in Frigia should cool down my daughter. Then, who knows? Perhaps We might marry her off to someone worthy of her treachery.”

“Why, thank you, Sire,” said Klytus with genuine pleasure; he was already savoring the moment. “What can I ever do to repay you?”

“Just get me the traitors Gordon and Barin!”

Klytus bowed. “It shall be done!” He paused a moment. “With pleasure.”

Flash and Fico, the Tree Man, entered the dark temple; the former searched for weapons, and the latter knelt to pick up the sole weapon in the temple, a knife lying beneath a window.

“Where are the weapons?” asked Flash eagerly, though he secretly wondered how crossbows and knives would help him rescue his friends.

“Heh, heh, feel one,” replied Fico, pressing the point of a double-edged blade in Flash’s back. There was the heavy rustle of men

making no effort to conceal their approach. *Just like the cops*, thought Flash. Each window was suddenly filled with Tree Men, their swords and knives bared.

Barin and the old priest entered the doorway as men standing outside ignited torches. The men in the windows were briefly silhouetted pitch black against the blinding white, and the visual effect encompassed Flash's entire field of sight. The glow of the torches quickly diminished as the men jumped from the windows and surrounded Flash in a line of blades. The second shift hung the torches on fixtures inside the temple, then calmly withdrew their swords and knives, becoming a second row of blades as well.

Leaning against a wall, Barin restrained a smile with difficulty. "Do you know where you are?"

"Don't you?" asked Flash.

"You have trespassed where only a Tree Man may enter!" said the old priest. "Fortunately Fico and a friend managed to see you commit this heinous crime. A stranger in our temple must try the Wood Beast or die!" His indignation could only have been the result of genuine rage; Flash guessed they both had been duped.

"It figures," said Flash. "You guys must make up these dadblamed rules as you go along!"

"That has been our custom since time immemorial," said Prince Barin. "You entered here of your own free will, Earthling. But I swear by the Great God Arbor, because of my word to Aura, I won't kill you unless you beg me to."

"If you're so confident of victory"—Flash's eyes narrowed—"then why don't you try against me? How do you know your God Arbor isn't on my side?" Improvising desperately, he knew a slim chance of victory was better than none at all.

The men regarded each other with hard, meaningful expressions. A few mumbled about the possibility Flash had been sent here by the ineffable.

That'll be as good a reason as any, thought Flash.

As the Earthling had expected, Barin took it as a personal affront that his men would rationally consider the proposition. "The Beast lies somewhere in this stump. At all times, there are five safe passages; the Beast always inhabits the sixth. Its venom contains a substance so poisonous that the merest scratch infects its victims with a bliss so glorious and magnificent that it drives them insane. The victims slowly die witless."

"You mean—like the Joke that Kills?" asked Flash.

“Something like that,” said Barin. “Are you scared? No? Well then, let the test begin!”

As the priest poked his staff into the stump, Flash glared at Barin. “You first,” he dared.

Snorting once, Barin removed his glove, tucked it in his belt, and walked toward the Wood Beast. When he thrust his arm into a stub, he stared at Flash as if his fate was a trifle in light of his overwhelming hatred. He withdrew his arm with a triumphant air. “What would Aura think of you now?”

Despite Barin’s cockiness, Flash could not help but notice that he had pulled out his arm somewhat quicker than the youth had. The Terran quarterback did not take the time to contemplate his approaching death or to move ponderously, as befits a man taking the loneliest walk. Returning Barin’s stare with an equal amount of antipathy, he abruptly thrust his arm into a stub. He trembled when he removed it.

Barin stuck in his arm up to the elbow. The creature hissed and growled, and Barin held his breath. But he pulled out his arm unharmed.

Once again, Flash thrust his arm. Barin licked his lips as he anticipated the inevitable. Rarely did the Wood Beast wait four times before striking. The Prince controlled himself with difficulty when, despite the Beast’s growling, it was apparent the Earthling was safe. For the time being.

“Second down,” said Flash, wiping perspiration from his brow. “Your play.”

Barin shook his head. “No, yours.”

“Are you sure these are the rules?”

“They’ve just been changed,” said Barin grimly.

Flash glanced at the Tree Men surrounding him. It appeared he had no choice but to continue. He thrust in his arm a third time, withdrawing it as soon as he dared.

With another nod, Barin indicated that Flash was to try a fourth time. Flash complied.

He gasped. The Wood Beast hissed. Flash’s mouth twitched and for a moment he had trouble retracting his arm. His hand covering his wrist where the wound should be, he whirled toward Barin. His eyes asked all the questions.

“Death is certain,” said Barin. “But only after tortured madness.”

“How—how long?” asked Flash.

Barin smiled and shrugged. “Hours—or days. Depending on your strength. I think you could last, oh, maybe two days. At least.”

Flash fell to his knees; he threw back his neck and exposed his chest to the Tree Man’s blade. “Please—end it now!”

Allowing the moment to creep as long as he dared, Barin slowly raised his sword. Flash suddenly pulled the Prince’s legs out from under him. Suffering a nasty bump on his head, Barin released his sword. He lay stunned, as his men stood frozen. Flash picked up the sword and held the tip at his throat.

“I tricked you, Barin!” He allowed the Prince to see that his wrist had not been stung. “One move and your boys’re going to be looking for a new prince.”

Standing over Barin for several moments, Flash stared deep into his eyes, attempting to reach the decent he sensed in the Mongian’s heart. His instincts, normally infallible in such matters, could not fail him a second time. The Tree Men backed away, dropping their weapons at the Earthling’s silent command.

Discarding the sword (because keeping it would hinder his escape), Flash bounded out an opening and leaped from the boardwalk. He caught a vine and slid down it as quickly as he dared.

Inside the temple, before the Tree Men had reacted, Barin cried, “He’s mine! I hunt him alone!”

The vine ended twenty feet above the swamp. Wondering if he would strike land or water, Flash dropped through the green mists. He landed in a foot of particularly fetid liquid. Without glancing about (he could not see far in any direction), Flash ran beneath the village. He did not have a plan *per se;* he was still desperately improvising. He hoped to return later and hijack a flier or something, but his immediate objective was to avoid recapture.

He dashed through a maze of swirling green mist. Occasionally he paused, felt his heart pounding, wondered how long he could continue running madly before he collapsed in an exhausted heap; his subsequent running was at a quicker pace, though it ultimately slowed until he paused again. The mists caressed and cooled his perspiration. His trousers soaked water up to his thighs, weighing him down as much as his fatigue; he perceived his steps as sluggish. Coherent fragments flickered through his mind as he ran. What if he traveled in a circle? What if he became lost forever? What would happen to Dale and Zarkov then? The frantic trembling of panic weakened his leg muscles. Beyond loomed what appeared to be a large shallow pool; near a huge trunk on the opposite side hung three vines. Flash smiled. Perhaps he might pick up information on his pursuers. Who knows?

He might even reassert some control over the situation. He made for the vines.

He stepped on what appeared to be a carpet of leaves over mud; and immediately sank to his waist in quicksand. All manner of horrible scenarios occurred to him, each one ending with his death. He imagined himself smothering to death, gasping for oxygen and instead sucking warm gook into his mouth and up his nose. Spotting some vines that led toward solid ground, he lunged for them, an effort which only caused him to sink another foot. He wished that he could reach the vines without lunging, but he was sinking too quickly to tread his way slowly. He had no choice but to lunge again. And again. The quicksand was up to his shoulders when he realized, with a shudder, that his only opportunity to grab the vines would be beneath the surface. His skin feeling as if it was pulling up stakes and crawling away from him, he submitted to the tug of the quicksand and blindly moved his hands through the density.

He found the vines. He pulled his head above the surface, experiencing a tremendous elation. Only in retrospect did he realize how much he feared death by suffocation. He pulled himself with difficulty to the dry land, turned over on his back, and drank in the sweet, musty air of Arboria. He lay silently for a moment. The peacefulness of the swamp was suddenly, surreally broken when the ground began to slurp.

Something big and blunt pressed against him, bearing him down before he could scramble from beneath it. The slurping ground swelled up like a frog's bulging throat. Instinctively, he grabbed at what appeared to be a huge spider leg before it weighed down his shoulder, and his free hand waved about until it, too, grasped a spider leg. He felt a tiny mouth equipped with a pair of miniature pincers working in the middle of his back. It would take that mouth a long time to eat him, but the spider legs would ensure he stayed within its pitiful range. The spider would slowly eat him for hours.

For the first time since he landed on Mongo, Flash panicked. He had endured shock after shock; he had been granted reprieve after reprieve, only to die helplessly in the grip of a giant spider. He fought back, but not with reason. He snapped off the tip of a spider leg and, rolling over, tried to pierce the inflated belly. But the skin was as tough as leather.

Standing on a gnarled root twice his height, Barin watched the struggle with a stoic façade. However, his stomach glowed with warmth, and he foresaw his future with a curious, overwhelming optimism. Soon the man he hated most in the universe would be shreds awaiting entry into the Sloth Spider's mouth. The blood vessels

in Barin's forehead throbbed. No, he would have to produce Gordon's body if Aura and Ming were to believe his story. He aimed his crossbow at the spider's stomach; he fired the incendiary arrow.

Flash listened as the arrow whizzed through the air and exploded in a shower of white sparks against the leathery stomach, deflating it like a stationary helium balloon. The legs immediately eased the pressure on Flash, enabling him to push himself to one end of the spider. White pus flew from the wound in a sputtering stream whose volume drowned the creature's last gasping slurps.

When Flash saw Barin standing over him and realized the Prince and no other had rescued him, he barely restrained a shout. He had reached Barin's well of decency!

He, too, felt a curious surge of optimism, but it quickly sank in the despair that nurtures a fatal discouragement as Barin quietly reloaded his weapon.

These people are just a mass of contradictions, thought Flash.

Barin grinned and aimed. Flash made ready to jump, but the spider's skin had folded over his feet. Breaking away would be difficult.

Suddenly, a laser beam blasted the crossbow from Barin's hands. Equally surprised, the foes turned to see a Hawk Man perched on a limb, with several of his fellows hovering nearby.

"Vultan wants a word with you, Barin."

"This arrogant scum begs a thousand pardons for having the impertinence to wake you, Most Imperious Leader," said the pilot of the transport flier. "Truly my head should be shorn from my shoulders and my precious jewels stuffed into my mouth for daring to distract you from the pleasant dreams which have doubtlessly ensnared you."

"What is your report?" replied Klytus. His tone hinted at weariness and confusion. He lay nearly perpendicular to the floor in a coffinlike bed installed in the wall.

"We've scanned a Hawk Man patrol four hundred miles east I am most ashamed to admit I anticipate your pleasure as I say that the Hawk Men have Gordon and Prince Barin with them."

Klytus stifled a yawn. "They are flying toward the Sky Palace?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Wake me when it's in sight." Klytus pressed a button; a panel slid down and enclosed the bed in darkness, concealing it from the crew, as it sank to a horizontal position.

Prince Vultan squatted on his silver Royal Perch in the banquet room of the Sky Palace. His mating urge had totally disappeared, but it would return soon enough, as soon as he took care of certain matters. His toes picked up straw and crushed it between them, his sole indication of nervousness as he scrutinized Gordon and Barin. (Though he ran his fingers through his beard, the allusion was to calculating detachment rather than agitation.) Pecking at either shoulder with no discernible rhythm, Luro stood beside the Hawk Man Prince; once he reached behind a guard and took a sweetmeat from a banquet table, but a disapproving glance from Vultan convinced him to return it.

Flash and Barin were flanked by guards. The awesome beauty of their journey from Arboria—in addition to their utter dependence on the strength of their captors—had so dazzled them they had forgotten the pressing issues of the Mongian kingdom, and they were only now becoming capable of coping with reality. Barin exclaimed, “You’d sell us to Ming?!”

Vultan rolled his eyes. “By the Gods, I think your surprise is genuine! Come on, Barin, do you actually expect mercy here? What would you do if I was a captive in your kingdom?”

Barin snorted disdainfully. “I would remind you of Article Seventeen of Ming’s Law: ‘No captive Prince of Mongo shall be offered for ransom without the option of combat with an opponent of his choice.’ ”

His eyes closed and his head bobbing, Vultan impulsively gestured for Barin to hurry it up during the recitation. Then he grasped the implications. His eyes popped open. “I haven’t read that stupid book in years. Does such an article exist?” he asked Luro.

“I’m afraid it does.”

Barin beamed. “I’ve read it many times,” he said proudly.

“You had good reason after Ming executed your father,” said Luro viciously.

“Now, now,” said Vultan, “I seem to recall Ming executed your father too.” He turned to Barin. “This is a damned nuisance. Who do you choose to fight?”

Barin glared at Flash. “Him!”

Stunned by this latest unexpected development, the Earthling exclaimed, “This place is a lunatic asylum!”

A giant of a Hawk Man with rippling bronzed muscles swung a mallet with all his strength at a gong a third taller than he. As Dale listened

to the reverberations resulting from the meeting of the mallet and the metal, she could not help but think her life had somehow become a J. Arthur Rank Production. Like a fragile sex object with no will of her own, she had been yanked from one melodramatic situation only to be thrust into another. As she and Zarkov walked to the court (glimpsing the Hawk Men perched on benches and tables through the spaces between the curtains), she wondered what ludicrous ceremony her captors would soon subject her to. She noticed Zarkov making mental figures while staring at his watch. "Hans, just what are you doing?"

"I'm computing just how much longer the Earth has remaining. Making allowances for time variables and other factors which seem farfetched to the layman, I calculate the Earth has about thirteen hours and five minutes left."

"That's wonderful! You're telling me we have to save the Earth and we haven't even found . . ." Then, she saw *him!*

When Flash saw Dale approaching, running along the border of the opening in the center of the banquet room, he broke away from Vultan and the guards too quickly for them to detain him. The vision of her—with her arms outstretched, her cheeks red with passion, her smile so sincere and gay—molded his life into a solid thing of permanence. Though he feared he would clumsily collide with her, she drifted into his strong arms like a dream personified. Her lips touched his for the first time, and it seemed the history of his entire life had inexorably led to this moment. What did it matter if this was a deterministic universe? The point was that he was in love, questions of free will be damned! He had never before felt so free as during those ten seconds when their lips drank in passions wild and plentiful before the awestruck court of the Hawk Men (not even the most famous mating rituals of legends equalled this).

"It's so crazy!" Dale breathlessly whispered into his ear. "Last time I saw you I prayed it was a dream; this time I'm praying it's not! Are you okay?"

Flash grinned so wide his mouth hurt. "I am now."

"Me too—but have I got some crazy stories to tell you!"

"Let's save them for our kids."

Holding her expression with an effort, Dale thought, *Our kids? Should I tell him now about my operation? Oh well, there's plenty of time. He'll take it well because he's such a liberal. But there's one thing that can't wait.* "If that's a marriage proposal, I accept."

Their lips again became thirsty for mutual ecstasy, and they neared one another as if moving outside of their own volition. But they had touched for only a moment when two grim guards pulled Flash away

from her.

Dale struck a guard on the biceps. “Will you leave us alone? I just got engaged!”

Flash smiled bravely. “See you in a while—I hope!”

“Where are they taking you?”

“Don’t ask,” replied Flash, looking over his shoulder.

As Flash and Barin faced Vultan, Dale strained to pick up some indication of what he was saying to them; she could not help but think that the Prince of the Hawk Men was, despite his tendency toward rashness, a crafty devil, a shrewd judge of character. Perhaps these attributes had saved him many times from the more severe manifestations of Ming’s wrath. At any rate, Vultan had realized he was safe from a treacherous blow because Barin’s hatred for Flash took precedence over all his other emotions; Dale admitted to herself that it required no great insight to realize Flash would never kill in cold blood, regardless of the provocation. Vultan evidently spoke in low tones, for the guards nearby leaned over to hear. However, his gestures were delivered robustly; he shook his fist between them, held his palm flat, turned it at sharp angles, stabbed the air with an imaginary knife, and shook his fist again. The bronze Hawk Man struck the gong; when its noise died, Vultan pointed to the flat disk in the center of the Sky Palace and said loudly, “All right, I want you two to get out there and fight!”

Barin followed Flash across a gangplank onto the disk. When Luro pulled a lever on a portable control box, the gangplank withdrew, hissing pneumatically. Flash glanced at the bottomless skies below; clouds of many colors billowed, but land was not to be seen. The disk appeared to be supported by rays generated by numerous antigravity devices, and Flash noticed panels that could insulate the disk from certain rays, thus implying it was not always stable. He gulped.

Biro threw two black whips between the duelists. “Let the combat begin!” proclaimed Vultan, Prince of the Hawk Men. “To the death!”

Flash attempted to shake Barin’s hand, but the Tree Man Prince was already taking off his gloves, disdainfully ignoring his foe. Barin casually threw his gloves off the disk.

They warily stalked one another, neither permitting the other to come too near the whips. Their leather soles provided little footing on the slick, smooth surface. Flash found himself concentrating as much on maintaining his balance as on what Barin was doing.

Barin lunged for the whips. Flash smacked him with a right cross, making a direct hit on the nose. Barin rolled with the punch, otherwise his nose would have sprayed him with his own blood. After

they regained their footing, Barin retaliated, striking Flash a glancing blow on the cheekbone.

Hawk Men and Hawk Women cooed with excitement, but a scowling Vultan, his mating urges suddenly prodding him to engage in less violent activities, sat tugging at his beard.

Flash and Barin exchanged several blows, repeatedly sending each other away from the whips. Then they stalked about again, each awaiting an opening. Barin found his when Flash glanced at Dale (standing between Zarkov and Vultan) to see how she was faring. Lunging forward, the Tree Man Prince grabbed a whip.

At that point, an irritated Vultan demanded that Luro hand over the disk controls.

Barin snapped his whip three meters to Flash's left. And two meters to Flash's right. He would have snapped it a third time to the same rhythm, but his foot slipped a bit and he was forced to steady himself. Even as he did so, Vultan manipulated the controls, causing the disk to sway at this angle and that, like a saucer balanced on a juggler's stick. Flash regretted that his professional football career had not helped him to become more graceful; he was totally unprepared to deal with this contest of balance; even his most delicate moves on Astroturf had been brutal and swift, as befits those of a passing quarterback. Now he concentrated on maintaining his balance, on the defensive, while the more poised Barin pressed the attack. Finally, the swaying of the disk aided him in reaching his whip.

Dale bit into her fist and held tightly onto Zarkov's arm. The scientist caressed her hand, absently attempting to comfort her while he stared in horror at the proceedings.

Though Flash flicked his whip at Barin, his only purpose was to hold off the Prince's relentless attack. He grabbed at the tip of Barin's whip twice, each time only clasping empty air. And he was, oddly enough, partially relieved at each failure, for he did not know if he would be able to keep his footing while he tried to pull the weapon from Barin's hands. The futility and the insanity of this senseless combat was distracting Flash as he felt a leather snake twirl about the handle of his whip and bite into his fingers. He released his weapon just as Barin jerked his in a manner that sent Flash's flying onto the disk. Pausing to savor the moment, Barin kicked Flash's whip off the disk, deep into the bottomless sky. Shocked, making a token lunge toward his weapon though it was already too late by far, Flash lost his balance and slipped to one knee.

Dale screamed, immediately regretting it. Vultan, on the other hand, proclaimed, "This is boring!" He pressed a button in an impatient

manner that implied he wished to end the duel swiftly.

Blunt-edged knives with sharp, spikelike points rose from the surface of the disk; when Vultan manipulated certain controls, they rose and fell in a chaotic pattern.

Aghast at this latest unexpected horror, beset by a vision of a bloody Flash with the knives protruding throughout his body, Dale screamed a second time. She habitually screamed with her eyes closed, so she did not see Barin accidentally wrap the end of his whip around a knife.

The duelists half-rushed, half-slid toward one another on the tilting disk; they grappled like demonic wrestlers. Suddenly, Barin caught Flash in a terrible grip and bent him backward, directing his face toward the point of a knife.

“Promise me something!” Flash wheezed.

“What?”

“If you kill me, team up with Vultan and fight Ming.”

Barin’s only reply was renewed pressure, forcing Flash’s face a centimeter nearer to the knife.

“You’ve got to!” said Flash. “For your own sake!”

For many moments the duelists were still, two statues engaged in an eternal struggle. But gradually, due to his advantage in leverage, Barin pressed Flash downward, downward, the progress slow but steady. Barin’s victory and Flash’s gory impalement seemed inevitable.

Suddenly, Dale shouted, “Flash, I love you! And we have twelve hours left to save the Earth!”

As if saving his own life was not enough justification, this was all the incentive Flash required. Aided by an onslaught of adrenaline coursing through his system, Flash rallied and pushed Barin away.

The Prince of the Tree Men, thinking victory inevitable, believing the Earthling to be ultimately an inconsequential vexation in the scheme of the universe, had not expected another effort on Flash’s part. Indeed, Barin found the turnabout rather astounding as the disk tilted sharply, causing him to lose what remained of his foothold, sending him flying toward the edge. He managed to land belly-first, but he was unable to grab a knife due to the fact that Vultan caused those in his immediate vicinity to sink into the disk. His fingers futilely dug into the greased surface, and a panic unlike any he had ever known welled up inside him as he felt his feet, and then his legs, dangle over nothingness.

Flash realized more quickly what was happening. He knew there was only one chance to rescue Barin, and though the Prince had tried

to impale him horribly but a moment before, Flash did not hesitate to try to save him. He leaped toward the edge, grabbed the whip wrapped around the knife, and swung out, catching Barin by the wrist.

For a long moment they stared at one another. Then, wide-eyed, Barin looked below.

"Climb up my arm!" said Flash.

"You've won!" boomed Vultan. "Let him fall!"

Flash ignored the Hawk Man Prince. "Quick! I can't hold you much longer!"

Nervously running his fingers through his beard and involuntarily flapping his wings, Vultan absently allowed the disk to right itself. "What is this?" he asked of Flash's deed.

"Humanity!" proclaimed Zarkov.

"Humph. Madness," replied Vultan gruffly. But he left the controls alone.

After Flash pulled Barin to safety, they knelt and stared at one another, breathing heavily and sweating profusely. Flash held out his hand, but the Tree Man Prince still refused to shake it. *My God, what if Zarkov's wrong?* thought Flash, recalling his attempt to shake hands with the red-robed leader. *What if the gesture is unfriendly on Mongo?*

Prince Barin was dizzy, his innards swirling in a maelstrom; the Earthling became truly real in his eyes for the first time as he thought, *Gordon means it! He's sincere.* Barin pondered the innumerable killings he had witnessed, the slayings he had performed himself, and the mercy killings in the sacred temple. His bloody past became a dream, and he realized that existence was meaningful only if you dared to mold it in accordance with the nobler aspects of human nature. He clasped Flash's hand. "Where you go, I follow!" He leaped to his feet and shouted to the flabbergasted crowd, "There is something higher than Ming's Law!"

"Oh, there is, is there?" asked Vultan loudly, moving toward the edge of the platform. He pointed at the smiling Tree Man. He spoke angrily. "Would you care to elucidate on the matter? Would you care to demonstrate the practicability of this higher law before Ming blasts both our kingdoms to shreds?"

The inner glow warming Barin, the glow even the Hawk Men with the thickest skulls perceived, would not permit him to be dismayed by the questions. He appeared to have every intention of answering. Everyone, including and especially Flash, was interested in what he had to say. However, his answer, regardless of its potential brilliance and relevance to the revolutionary situation at hand, was ill-favored

by the Fates. For just as Barin opened his mouth to demonstrate anew the thespiac abilities that had amused a tyrant, sirens blared throughout the Sky Palace.

A stunned populace watched through the entry to the port as the black vessel of Klytus approached.

Flash and Barin moved off the disk, walking across the gangplank.

The black shuttlecraft docked. Its doors opened.

The people waited. Vultan looked toward Luro and Biro, but he did not wipe the perspiration from his forehead. Dale and Zarkov watched their captors, searching for an indication of their eventual treatment. Attempting to conceal his nervousness, Flash ran his tongue between his teeth, biting down until the nerve endings began to throb. Only Barin awaited Klytus's appearance with a relaxed demeanor; he smiled at Flash and moved close to him.

Finally, Klytus walked alone down the dock, into the banquet room. The very wind had stilled during his approach, as if he wielded power over the elements themselves.

Prince Barin regarded the masked man with a royal, proud air new to the eyes of Mongians.

Klytus, as usual, was unimpressed. "Agent Zarkov, you will be liquidated for treachery. As for you, Prince Vultan, you will surrender these fugitives at once or the Imperial Fleet will blast your kingdom and your subjects to atoms." Raising his shoulders and holding his hands before his stomach, Klytus expected them all to succumb to the inevitable.

11

A Kingdom for Flash!

KLYTUS turned his terrible, impassive mask toward all the people of interest to him in the Sky Palace, as if he was reading emotions he had lost all aptitude for comprehending. His cold, white eyes rested on a certain green-clad Prince. “Step forward, Barin.”

The Prince’s shoulders rose. He spoke grimly. “Address me as Prince Barin.”

“No longer, I think.” Klytus’s reply was casual, at least for him, but Flash believed the Great Gold Face had misunderstood a few nuances in Barin’s tone.

Flash did not doubt, however, that Klytus would have smiled during his next statement if he had possessed the ability. Perhaps he did smile, despite his ingrained stoicism, beneath his mask. He said, “Princess Aura, under our expert persuasion, has implicated you, Barin, in high treason. You are under arrest”—he gestured in an arc —“along with these Earthlings. A prison ship will be here shortly to take you away.”

Barin was pale. “You—you tortured Aura?”

“You bastard!” said Flash. “She may be a spoiled, self-centered little brat, but there’s a decent core in her evil heart!”

Klytus, ignoring Flash, spoke directly to Barin. “An interesting girl! I think she found it rather enjoyable.”

Barin struck Klytus beneath the jaw, stunning him. Unheeding of the pain of his fist, Barin grabbed Klytus and spun him about. “Here, Flash!”

The Earthling scooped up Klytus, ran across the gangplank, and hurled Klytus onto the disk as if he were a twenty-five kilogram sack of fertilizer.

The first knife Klytus struck impaled his forearm. The second ripped through his stomach. Three and four stuck through his right leg. He struggled for a moment. His effort caused number two to tear into his intestinal tract. Still, he would not succumb, possessed as he was of an utterly logical will to live. Managing to slide his forearm from the blade, leaving behind a coating of a yellow puslike substance, he tried

to support himself on his hands. He looked down at his organs slurping onto the disk. Then he collapsed. His fingers twitched four times. Now that the will which had perpetuated his existence had been snuffed out, his face began to flow through the openings of his mask.

Horrified, Dale thought, *I take it back. Flash would commit murder in cold blood, if blood's the word.* She shivered.

Luro pecked madly at his shoulders. "This does it. We're up the void now! The rockets will be on their way!"

"Must you belabor the point?" asked a grumpy Biro.

Vultan ignored the bickering of his two aides. "Into the air, my Hawk People! Take everything you can carry! Fly for your lives!"

The Sky Palace immediately became a scene of pandemonium, as winged people scurried or flew about, some to the skies, others to retrieve their belongings from the nest areas.

His clawed weapon in hand, Vultan turned to Flash. "You young hothead! You've brought down destruction on my kingdom!"

Barin stepped between the Earthling and the Hawk Man.

"No, Vultan, he has shown us the way. Stand with us and fight!"

"Against the Imperial Fleet? Your yolk must have soured before you were hatched, my boy; you haven't any brains!"

Much as Zarkov had earlier, Barin clenched his fist in front of Vultan's face. "It's the perfect time. They won't expect resistance, and we'll take them by surprise!"

"We can do it," said Flash in a steady voice.

Zarkov rubbed his hands briskly. "Do you have a lab? I'll trick up some new weapons!"

Vultan's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Right now? In a few minutes? What kind of scientist are you?"

Zarkov shrugged. "The usual kind. They taught us how to think pretty quickly back on Earth. You should have seen the things I had to come up with to get my doctorate."

"You're all mad! My only duty is to save my Hawk People," said Vultan. "Evacuate! Fly!"

"Wait!" said Flash. 'Take us with you."

Vultan shook his head. "There's already much more than we can carry. Impossible."

Barin said, "You're leaving us to die!"

"You know Ming's Law, Barin," said the Prince of the Hawk Men.

“Outside his kingdom, the hunter becomes the hunted.”

In less than five minutes, the entire Sky Palace population had fled, leaving behind an extremely untidy banquet room and four stranded ex-prisoners. The Hawk People had flown in all directions, and now they were black specks against blue and purple skies with shimmering pink veils.

Flash walked toward a luxurious section of the room. “Quick! Help me pull down these drapes. Find ropes somewhere. We’ll find ropes and jump to Arboria.”

“It’s not quite that easy,” said Barin.

“Do you want to stay here?” asked Flash tensely.

“It must be fifty miles down!” said Dale, peering over the platform.

“No problem,” said Zarkov. “A body reaches maximum velocity within a few hundred feet.”

“Wonderful,” replied Dale sourly.

Flash tossed a drape to Dale. “Lay it flat,” he said. “We’ll knot lines at the corners and tie them to our belts.”

Suddenly, they heard a roaring so loud it drowned the hissing wind as an afterthought. Barin cursed, his words mere hints in the onslaught of sound. He remained behind as the Earthlings rushed to a balcony, only to see four huge fliers breaking through the clouds and moving toward the Sky Palace.

Flash and Zarkov stared at one another, knowing there was no time during which to attempt another daring escape. Dale embraced Flash, burying her head in his chest.

Like a man sentenced to die (and in his opinion, being brainwashed was a crueler fate), Zarkov retrieved a white drape and waved it from the balcony.

The interior of the Imperial Flier was decorated in crimson and black motifs, only slightly darker than the colors of Ming’s dress uniform. The Emperor of the Universe wore a pointed skullcap with a widow’s peak; when the light struck it at certain unpredictable angles, it shimmered with white lines. Upon his chest were insignia representing the Golden Light that had Created the Cosmos and the Royal Red Blood that Coursed through His Imperial Veins. The material on his shoulders rose into curved peaks highlighted with a golden tapestry. He tugged at his beard as he watched Zarkov wave the white flag of surrender on a screen inside his Royal Command Post.

“Oh Imperious Leader,” extolled an officer in a red uniform which, despite its finery, was extremely drab in comparison to that of Ming’s,

“would it please you to see those accursed primitives blasted into so many wayward atoms?”

Ming pretended to ponder the question. “Not yet. Send down a shuttle. Bring back Barin, Zarkov, and Dale Arden.”

“And Gordon?”

“No. Prepare Our Imperial Lander.”

Tight-lipped and scowling, Flash watched the shuttle take away the three people who so quickly had come to mean more to him than life itself. His hands behind his back, he faced away from the monstrosity in human form who was responsible for this latest defeat. It was all he could do to restrain himself from tossing Ming off the Sky Palace; he imagined Ming falling between the platform and the disk, his skullcap glistening in the light of the cosmic whirlpool, his form ever diminishing as his limbs futilely waved about. Only the presence of two hooded guards aiming nasty-looking firearms (with yellow fins on either side of the barrel and casing) prevented Flash from fulfilling his fantasy. However, he did not despair. Though things looked pretty hopeless at the moment, he had triumphed over insurmountable odds in the past, and he silently vowed not to give up until this ruthless tyrant was an ignoble wretch in a foul dungeon, or a common laborer in the mines (whichever best served the cause of justice).

Perhaps Ming, with his undeniable understanding of human character, realized Flash’s thoughts as he watched the muscles of the Earthling’s back tense until they were like coiled springs; perhaps Ming possessed the same incredible will and self-control that prevented Flash from reacting to the sudden turn of events like an uncivilized brute. Indeed, Ming barely indicated how much he gloated. He merely waited until the shuttle had disappeared and Flash had turned to him. Only then did he distort his lean features with an evil smile.

Relaxing with an effort, Flash rubbed his palm on the bare skin above the crest of his red and black tank-top shirt. “Why aren’t I going with them?”

Ming’s smile disappeared. He spoke with a neutrality Klytus would have been proud to achieve. “I have other plans for you.”

Flash snorted. “I can imagine.”

“You want to destroy me. Why?”

“I must destroy you if I’m to save the Earth.”

“What if I granted you a kingdom?” Ming rested an elbow on a palm, caressing his mustache with his free thumb and forefinger.

"If you *what?*"

"Ming the Merciless, Rightful Ruler of the Universe, here and now offers Flash Gordon a Kingdom of Mongo to rule over as his own."

"You're as crazy as a bedbug. Why would you do that?"

The Emperor divested himself of his imperial manner as much as he dared; his smile was an unsuccessful attempt to breach the social barriers between them. "I confess it: You fascinate me. I've never before met your like. You're a hero.

"You've survived every peril of Mongo. Your name is whispered in the streets. You even slew the dreaded Klytus. Who better than you to rule a kingdom?" His eyes suddenly revealed him to be lost in his own thoughts. "You'll learn the trick of it soon enough. My illustrious grandfather was hailed as the evilest ruler the universe had ever created. During his prime, life was sweet and pleasurable for his subjects, because they never knew when it would become unbearably cruel—or when it would cease altogether. Now it's easy to see where my grandfather made his mistakes. The reality of his malevolence is something less than the legends would have me believe. Indeed, my grandfather hardly qualified as the embodiment of pure evil, regardless of his avowed intentions. However, there are tyrants whose ideals of themselves are great accomplishments. The knowledge that my ancestor perceived what he must do so clearly has given my life a genuine purpose. Without this knowledge, my highest ambitions would be fulfilled merely by mindlessly slaying and fornicating and communing with the universe, goals any common tyrant in my position can easily achieve. My grandfather's ideals are as permanent as a thousand monuments, for they have erected a monument nobler than stone in my ruthless heart."

I'll buy that, thought Flash, though Ming's words uncomfortably reminded him of those of a leader of men he held in great esteem, a leader whose ideals represented tolerance and benevolence, in addition to sacrificing for the good of all, a leader cut down before his first term in office had ended. In recent years this leader's actual performance in office had been criticized, perhaps accurately, perhaps not (for in the misty land of politics, everything is relative). But no one had ever denied that the mere fact of his ideals had become a potent force in the hearts of a generation.

"You'll soon enough learn the trick of being a ruthless tyrant," continued Ming. "Terrify your subjects, give them shows. Barbarous creatures! Violence is all the poor brutes understand. Rule well enough, and I'll even return you to Earth."

Flash blinked.

"Its moon is drifting very close to it right now. Making allowances for time differentials due to the curvatures of space, I should think Earth's end might come within a few hours."

"You'd call off the attack?" Flash was almost hopeful.

"I could." Again, the neutrality of tone.

"Everyone would be *saved?"*

"Just those left alive. After the earthquakes and tidal waves and the inevitable breakdown of civilization, they won't be quite the human beings you remember. They'll be more tractable, easier for you to rule in the name of Ming."

"You mean slaves."

"Let's say they'll be satisfied with less."

"Mindless zombies!" snapped Flash.

"Ask your friend Zarkov. He'll explain what happens to animals subjected to extreme stress."

Very funny, thought Flash. *If you have your way, I'll never see Zarkov again.* "What about Dale?"

Ming drew himself to his full height. "We have decided to marry her. She promises to take Us on hitherto unimagined pathways to ecstasy. We will breed with her and send our Imperial progeny back to populate your Earth." He shrewdly assessed Flash's expression. "You prefer death to a kingdom?"

Flash nodded grimly.

"I'm disappointed, but I suppose I should have expected that a hero would refuse." He walked to the edge of the platform. "Still, I'd rather see you at my side . . ." He kicked a chalice into the void. ". . . than scattered into atoms."

By now Flash glared openly at Ming; he reined in his anger with difficulty.

"But as you wish," said Ming. "We'll return to the Imperial Rocket," he said to the hooded guards. "Leave the Earthling here, to his doom."

Inside the prison ship, Zarkov supported Dale as they peered through a portal and watched the Sky Palace gradually recede in the blue and purple skies. They ignored Ming's presence.

"Amazing," said Zarkov, ever the analytical scientist. "Those columns of light below the palace must be solid enough to cut off gravity waves. What an incredible paradox! The most dependable foundation is the most nebulous of energies."

Zarkov continued expounding on his speculations in order to

distract Dale from her concern and fear, but the intellectual exhibition was incomprehensible babble as far as she was concerned, especially when the Sky Palace lurched to one side and then began to wobble like a poorly thrown Frisbee.

Dale covered her face; Zarkov embraced her, expecting her body to rack with the spasms of her crying. But she controlled herself, and Zarkov feared that her heart had become numb, insensitive to its pain. Perhaps something vital in her soul was soon to be snuffed out forever.

The doctor drew in a sharp breath, then immediately regretted it. For Dale looked up to see the Sky Palace falling through billowing clouds.

The palace had fallen for only a few seconds when laser beams stabbed out at it from the vessels of the Imperial Fleet.

A series of small explosions sent out arcs of yellow sparks and torrents of smoke.

Suddenly the entire palace was lost in a blaze of red and yellow. When the smoke cleared, only shards of debris plummeted through the clouds.

Dale turned to Ming. “You murderer!” she exclaimed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

But the only reply of the Emperor of the Universe was a sardonic smile.

Interlude

NOT only was the moon dangerously veering from its orbit, but comets careened wildly into the Earth's path. The texture of the ether developed unusual, indescribable colors at various places for extended periods, as if the universe itself was somehow sickened by the Earth's presence. On the planet, things had become even stranger.

Huge evergreens burst through the ice-packed surface of the North Pole. Ricky Montrose of Tazewell, Virginia, fell through a dimensional portal temporarily created by an electrical disturbance in the atmosphere; the kid was never seen again, much to the relief of his parents. ("He was a little terror!" Mr. Montrose became fond of saying.) Enrico Brusati of Rome discovered that his weight consistently registered at thirty kilograms, though his girth remained the most spectacular (or repulsive) in the city; no one could put forth a reasonable explanation for the phenomenon, and Enrico adamantly refused to permit the doctors to puncture his belly with a hat pin, even under the strictest conditions. *Pravda* insisted there was nothing fishy going on in the U.S.S.R., an observation which normally would have passed without notice; but the Soviet news agency made the remark every day, and foreign diplomats sent secret correspondence to their superiors complaining about the tigers stalking the streets of Moscow.

Theoretical physicists, however, became preoccupied with the color variations of the ether, and when Dr. Peter Falkenburg of the Jet Propulsion Labs in Pasadena, California, read a newspaper article on the disappearance of the Montrose boy, he had a startling premonition of Earth's ultimate fate. "Only one man can construct a device which can send out rays to halt the degeneration of the ether," said Dr. Falkenburg to a colleague. "We must find this man and offer him all the assistance he requires. He's our only hope!"

"Who is this man?" asked the colleague, lighting a cigarette.

"Dr. Hans Zarkov!"

12

Here Comes the Bride

FLASH was on his knees constructing a parachute from a blanket when the abrupt swaying of the Sky Palace knocked him off the platform. He grabbed a bar, pulled himself into a hole, and found himself sliding down a tubular silver chute, unable to halt or even impede his progress. *I hope there's some laundry down there so I have a soft landing,* he thought.

The chute took him to a dock. Holding onto the sill he had grabbed to break his fall, Flash realized he was seeing a rocket cycle, probably used by friendly visitors of the Hawk Man Kingdom. He had never before seen this invention, and consequently he had no idea how to fly it. But he thanked the Fates he was a fast learner.

Maintaining his balance with difficulty as he crossed the floor, he straddled the cycle, supporting himself by leaning against a metal bar. He gunned the engine. The force of the cycle's kick, combined with the violent lurching of the palace, sent him flying against the wall. He pulled himself back onto the cycle and gunned it again, this time prepared for its kick. Exhaling bolts of flame so hot their color was pink, the cycle slid down its short track.

Unnoticed by all, Flash was a kilometer away from the Sky Palace when it exploded.

Sitting on a limb on the forest moon of Arboria, Luro the Hawk Man picked an insect off his chest. "They were brave creatures, Vultan. With respect, the man who rid us of Klytus shouldn't be deserted."

Vultan winced. It was bad enough he was feeling claustrophobic beneath the canopy of foliage, but Luro had spoken loud enough for several of his other Hawk Men perched in the trees to hear. "Will you shut up? So maybe I'd do it differently if I could. But there's no way I can help a man who's dead!"

"Perhaps . . ."

"Yes?" said Vultan eagerly.

"No. Forget it. I was going to say that you could ensure that Flash Gordon didn't give his life in vain, but it's too ridiculous to even

contemplate."

Vultan pursed his lips and nodded. "True, true. Still, it's too bad." Resting his elbows on his knees, he placed his large fists beneath his bearded chin.

Suddenly, static drowned the murmurings of the Hawk Men. A familiar voice manifested itself. "Flash Gordon to Vultan; do you read me? Mayday! Mayday!"

The Prince of the Hawk Men looked about. Like many of his kind, he believed in reincarnation, but this development was unprecedented. Then he smiled with relief. He spoke into a wrist communicator. "This is Vultan. I read you! Where are you?"

"Flying blind on a rocket cycle."

"We're in Arboria. I'll send you a homing beam."

"Thank you, Vultan." A pause. "For what it's worth, Ming's got Dale, Zarkov, and Barin."

"I see," the Prince said heavily. "My thanks to *you.*"

"Yeah? What for?"

"Oh, for giving a dumb old bird a second chance. After all, the worth of a man's life can only be judged by the droppings he leaves behind him. Over to homing beam!"

Vultan suppressed a thrill of pleasure, for he knew he had committed himself and his subjects to a harrowing enterprise which would possibly result in the death or total subjugation of all. Nevertheless, he did not doubt his subjects would accept the risk. Some, such as Biro and Luro, would welcome it.

A certain blond Earthling also welcomed it. While flying a rocket cycle through green and blue skies he let out whoops and hollers and other Alabama war cries.

Dale Arden, on the other hand, experienced no exhilaration, no hope, no sensation, only an overpowering numbness and weariness that caused her every movement to be the result of a tremendous effort. Sitting on a bed of pillows, surrounded by unfortunate harem women who reveled in their exploitation, Dale resisted the comfort offered by the more hedonistic women who liked to keep in practice. Under different circumstances, her pink and blue gown would have inspired a number of sensual fantasies in her subconscious; its touch was soft, like the caress of a tender man. And knowing the caresses she would soon be subjected to, like any woman who permitted powerful men to use her body in any fashion they deemed fit (without regard for the spirit residing inside), she felt like a traitor to everything she had

believed in, not to mention everything Flash would have wished for her. The fact that she had no choice but to surrender was not comforting, not in the least.

The doors to the chamber opened. Two red-robed guards threw Aura, daughter of Ming the Merciless, onto the bed of pillows.

Suddenly, the weariness left Dale. She felt alive again. But she was more like an animal than a thinking creature as she bore upon Aura and slapped her with all her might, sending her flying across the bed.

"Are you mad? Stop!" exclaimed Aura. "I'm a prisoner too!"

"You damned Mongoperson!" said Dale, ruthlessly and repeatedly striking Aura with a pillow, then wading in with her tiny fists. "You couldn't tell the truth to save your life!"

Aura warded off the blows, only to find herself speaking to a wrestling opponent. "Dale, stop! I'm going to be exiled to Frigia in the morning!"

"Liar!" Rolling onto her back, Dale threw Aura across the bed for the second time. Her knee gave Ming's daughter extra impetus.

Before Dale could renew the onslaught, Aura rushed toward the door, which opened automatically. However, the two guards threw her back into the room. On their knees, Dale and Aura faced each other across the pillows.

The savage rage was beginning to leave the Earthling now, but her hatred remained at a constant level. "It's a trick," she said woodenly.

"Is this a trick? Could tears come from my eyes if my heart hadn't changed?"

Dale leaned over and touched the liquid flowing down Aura's cheeks.

"I've been such a spoiled fool, Dale. I never knew what my father was until he let Klytus put the Bore Worms on me." She shrugged. "I confess that at first the pain was rather interesting, but as the little creatures made progress, the pain became out of control, utterly unbearable."

"I believe you, Aura, but I don't trust you. You have Ming's blood in your veins. You'll be cozying up with him again in the morning."

"Not if you give him this." She pulled a black compact from the depths of her flimsy pink gown. "It's a deadly poison. Unless his passions have gained complete control of him, my father drinks a Power Potion before he makes love. Drop this into his chalice!"

Dale stared at the compact for several moments, contemplating and discarding several courses of action. Then she shook her head. "I can't, Aura. Not after I gave your father my word of honor."

"What word?"

"To try to be a good wife if he'd spare Doctor Zarkov and Barin. He vowed he would."

"My father has never kept a vow in his life!"

Dale appeared crestfallen. "Oh? And he seemed so sincere. Well, isn't that just like a man? But I can't help it. Keeping our word, or at least trying to, is one of the things that make us Earthlings better than you Mongopeople."

Aura's reaction was destined never to be revealed. For at that moment the door opened again. Flanked by two guards, Hedonia entered, wearing an ornate green gown that, Dale noticed with some satisfaction, exposed a bit too much of her tummy for her own good.

"Follow us," Hedonia said to Dale. "It is time to prepare you for the bliss which is to come."

Her lower lip trembling, Dale grabbed Aura's wrist. "I'm lost. Nothing can save me now!"

A rocket cycle tore through the shimmering veils and swirling colors of the Mongian sky. Flash Gordon maneuvered it through the winds. He felt merged with the megaunits of power expended by the cycle; his muscles flexed with pleasure whenever he manipulated the steering controls. He zoomed over the peasants laboring in the mines, the vast forest of pale crystals, the charred remnants of Ming's personal firing range, and finally, into the valleys and crevices carved into the barren land about the Mongian city. Flash felt an exhilaration he had never imagined possible as he swooped into an especially large crevice and saw the red and yellow city before him, at this distance an insect in his path, fated to be crushed and then forgotten. As it loomed, he gained more respect for it, but it was still a thing to be conquered, and he experienced a fraction of the pleasure Ming knew every day of his life. He permitted himself a moment of philosophical speculation, thanking the Fates he had always possessed a firm set of principles guarding him from the darker side of human nature, a luxury Ming had never enjoyed. And with that moment acknowledging the common spiritual bond between them, Flash divested himself of all feelings of nebulous kinship with Ming. The Ruler of the Universe was his foe. For the first time in his life, Flash was prepared to cast his principles into the void. After all, the hand of Dale Arden, not to mention the fate of Earth, was at stake.

He accelerated the rocket cycle. It shot forward dangerously, but he held the controls securely.

* * *

General Kala sauntered up and down the rows of monitors with an intense air. She could not have been happier if Ming had granted her a kingdom. The sudden loss of Klytus was an unexpected reprieve from a symbolic term of confinement.

Consequently, she became extremely deflated when the colonel from Battle Control appeared on her telescreen and said, "General Kala, Flash Gordon is approaching!"

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, on a Hawk Man rocket cycle. Shall I inform His Majesty?"

"Imbecile. The Emperor would shoot you for interrupting his wedding with *this* news. Fire when Gordon's in range. Dispatch War Rocket Ajax to bring back his body."

Flash swung around the rocket cycle as lasers, fired by cannons, bolted about him. Their heat seemed to singe the atmosphere itself. Unable to resist a grin, Flash prayed the Mongians' communication devices were unable to transmit a close-up of him. His grin widened when he looked over and glimpsed the battleship slowly following him, like an obese carnivore suddenly granted the power of flight.

Aura rode upward in an elevator with a red guard. Her lower lip protruded more than usual, but otherwise she concealed her agitation admirably. She thought of the life she would lead on Frigia. It wasn't the coldness she minded so much, but the inadequate men of the icy moon. The ever present subzero temperatures had a definite detrimental effect on some of her favorite pastimes.

She wore a golden headdress, a pink gown, and a complimentary wrap that hung from her shoulders like a cape. She unloosed the wrap and let it drop.

"Pick that up, would you?" she asked the guard in a commanding tone.

The guard obeyed instantly.

Just as his fingers touched the wrap and were beginning to tighten about it, Aura withdrew two long pins from her belt. Gritting her teeth (she had never personally killed before), she buried the pins deep in the guard's back.

She appreciated the satisfied thrill that ignited her heart as she listened to the discordant noises of the guard's mechanical parts breaking down.

Dale Arden felt like a poison was seeping into her pores; the sensation of her glittering black gown was abhorrent. Her life stretched before her like a dreary monologue in purgatory, and she foresaw an existence without joy and without pleasure. Already the thought of her limbs intertwined with those of the debased murderer filled her with a revulsion unparalleled in her memory. The more intimate details of their marriage—well, she wondered why he found it necessary to marry her at all, if *that* was what he wanted. She sensed more than she knew the answer; he had to marry her if the consummation of his lust was to defeat her totally. If he took her without their mutual vows, she would still be free in her heart, regardless of the debaucheries he committed on her body.

Boy, I haven't slept with anybody like that since I was in high school, she thought.

As she walked down the seemingly endless hallways, escorted by two silent guards, she heard the voice of General Kala over the public address system:

"Attention, all wedding guests. While you await the ceremony, all palace screens will display for your viewing entertainment the executions of the traitors Barin and Zarkov."

This news so numbed Dale that the guards held her arms and forced her to walk onward. Her only thought was a recurring chorus of *That heel, that heel.*

A weight within her crushed her organs. She had never before felt so alone.

"Tell me more about this man Houdini," said Prince Barin to Doctor Zarkov. His interest was genuine, for they both were blindfolded and chained against a dungeon wall. They conversed to pass the time, to share their mutually incomprehensible dreams, to forge a bond of friendship.

For despite their widely divergent backgrounds, they shared a longing for freedom and spiritual wholeness. Both desires had been suppressed in Barin's breast, and he envied Zarkov his control over many factors of his personal destiny. Barin instinctively grasped that until he had decided to fight with Flash and not against him, his life had been fashioned totally by naturalistic forces. Zarkov, however, had undergone heady moments of well-being and good wishes toward the universe, moments when the entire history of Earth seemed to swell in his breast and enlarge his sense of personal identity. How sad that their lives were to end so soon, when this scientist could have taught him the nuances of living he fervently desired to learn.

Zarkov, too, found Barin interesting, particularly as a subject frequently in touch with the right hemisphere of his brain. He regretted (what he considered to be) the myriad failures of his own life, especially the lonely days spent without the warm, passionate, hot, burning touch of a woman.

They tensed as they heard the dungeon doors opening.

A laser fired twice. Something shattered and fizzled.

“Oh my God! Barin!” exclaimed Zarkov, suddenly buried beneath a crippling sorrow for his departed, barbaric friend.

Another burst.

Miraculously, Zarkov found himself dropping. He nearly collapsed when he landed. He pulled off his blindfold to see Aura speaking into a communicating device in the wall.

“Scanner malfunction, Area Seven Seven Delta. Under repair . . .”

The Earth scientist and the Mongian Prince had not been prepared for hope. Looking into one another’s eyes, they repressed their laughter until Aura released the communicator controls. When they saw that an unknown insurrectionist had painted “Long Live Flash!” on the wall between their places of bondage, they shook hands and embraced like brothers.

Flash flew the rocket cycle on a zig-zag path toward a red-tinged cloud hanging in a yellow sky. Laser beams flew past him, and he knew it was a matter of time before one struck him or his vessel. However, as he disappeared into the cloud, the warship ran out of time. He was nowhere to be detected.

The ornate behemoth hung in front of and below the cloud. Though it waited patiently, the captain inside was anything but patient. He paced about the command console; his men silently awaited his orders while he merely waited.

The captain could not know (and he was not clever enough to suspect) that Flash had emerged above the cloud to greet an army of hovering Hawk Men, spread out across the sky in a magnificent formation. They were armed with swords and Mongian explosives and lasers and clubs and with courage.

Vultan grinned, baring nearly all his white teeth, as Flash halted the rocket cycle beside him. He was proud of the Earthling, who had learned the subtleties of the vessel well under his tutorship.

“Our trap play worked well, Vultan,” said Flash.

“Excellent!” replied the Hawk Man Prince vigorously, his stiff wings flapping; he hovered like a somnambulistic hummingbird. “Now

they'll electrify the cloud."

Indeed, at that very moment the captain gave the order: "Charge capacitators to electrify the cloud. Prepare sky nets to catch Gordon's body."

The red cloud crackled with white bolts that not only embraced it, but crisscrossed through it so closely together that not even a bird could have survived the vicious onslaught. After a few moments, the captain ordered the electrical barrage to be halted. And waited.

As the cloud began its gradual dissipation, Vultan ordered the first wave of Hawk Men to attack. The majority remained where they were . . . and waited.

Flash watched the first wave disappear into the cloud, and he wondered about the texture of their lives; he prayed for them. He knew that in war men were fodder for the generals and little else, fodder which had to be conserved because supplies were limited, but he also knew that each Hawk Man possessed his hopes, dreams, and desires, the intangible objects that granted life its meaning. He trusted that each man who died today died willingly, for a cause he fervently believed in.

As the first wave of Hawk Men descended upon the war rocket, Ming's minions burst from the open hatches and onto the railways and fins with a thundering roar. Lasers singed the atmosphere. Hawk Men struck soldiers with clubs, stabbed them with broadswords, sent them falling from the ship. But the soldiers possessed superior weaponry, and many a Hawk Man fell from the sky as his body bled and his wings burned due to the scorching heat of the laser blasts. Soon the battle area was filled with the screams of the dying; the ship was stained with the colorful Mongian blood; and bodies of both sides regularly plummeted.

Watching the scene from above, Flash hardened himself against his more compassionate emotions as the battle progressed and the cloud dissipated. The Hawk Men were taking a terrible beating, but that was part of the plan. Flash spied old, irascible Biro, who radiated the vitality of twenty younger men, who had insisted so stubbornly on performing his appointed task that not even Vultan could overrule him; Biro crawled along the fin of the warship, carrying the explosive device which would blow up the bulkhead and allow the Hawk Men easy access inside. Biro crawled through the smoke of charred skin and overheated engines; he warded off several attackers; he planted the device (the bottom of which was a suction cup) and pulled out the antenna that would receive the detonation signal. Then he cried out; he grasped his side, nearly rolling off the fin.

“Biro’s been hit!” exclaimed Flash. “I’m going in!” And he promptly suited his actions to his words, revving up the cycle and bolting through the remaining wisps of red cloud.

“That young hothead!” said Vultan. Then he thought of Biro lying on the fin, of Flash’s bravery, of how the Earthling had not hesitated to rush to the aid of a companion he barely knew. “Ah, well, who wants to live forever?” he called out, laughing boisterously. “Attack! Dive, my Hawk Men, dive!”

And the remaining wave of Hawk Men swooped down to join the fray.

Flash leaped off the rocket cycle and onto the fin. Part of him was surprised at how he had accepted the grosser aspects of battle now that he was in the midst of it. He lifted Biro’s wing, winced at the sight of the wound, which must have been painful, minor though it was. “Are you all right?”

“They just winged me. Here’s the detonator,” said Biro hoarsely, removing a tiny control unit from his belt.

Flash dragged Biro to safety and pressed a button on the unit.

The bulkhead exploded. Men (inside and outside, friend and foe) screamed as shards of metal exploded in a deadly spray. At least one soldier caught pieces in his head and heart. Flash’s stomach turned as he saw a Hawk Man collapse and futilely attempt to halt the blood gushing from his wounded leg. A soldier shot the Hawk Man, putting him out of his misery. Picking up a laser gun Biro had appropriated during the battle, Flash sliced the soldier in half. He ignored his pleasurable sensations.

Flash moved into the warship.

Elsewhere, Vultan waded through the fray like an elemental force that only materialized whenever groups of men battled one another. He smashed in a skull with his club, disemboweled a second foe, and shattered a jaw, sending his victim plummeting. He stood tall and proud. There was an air about him, as if he was fated to survive the day, as if he was positive he would emerge from battle unharmed. That air, as much as his undeniable skill, was his greatest weapon. Vultan only allowed himself to be diverted from the task at hand when he heard the explosion. He glanced up, saw Luro make an affirmative and defiant gesture. “To the bulkhead, my Hawk Men, to the bulkhead!”

Soon Vultan caught up with Flash and the foremost Hawk Men as they fought their way through the ship. A Hawk Man set an explosive which tore asunder the door leading to the command post.

As the Hawk Men barged in, fighting and slaying all who stood in

their way, Flash tossed a Mongian grenade at the second level, killing the soldiers or else rendering them incapacitated. Vultan slew the captain.

The Hawk Men had taken the warship.

* * *

Aura led Zarkov and Barin through the maze of dungeon hallways she had often explored as a child; she was amazed she remembered them so well. They reached an elevator door. Aura manipulated her ring; a light shone from the jewel onto the fixture beside the door. “They’ve changed the code!” she exclaimed.

Before she had the opportunity to despair, Zarkov lifted her wrist next to the fixture and began fiddling with her device. “It’s okay. I’ll try to work it out.”

Aura turned to Barin, who hefted the laser she had taken from the guard. Ever since she had been in his presence, her knees had been weak, and she yearned for him to take her in his strong arms. She could not recall having previously felt this way about a man, but there was a purity and security in Barin’s spirit that attracted her to him as if he were completely new in her life, as if she had finally met the man she would gladly call master.

“I’ve changed too, Aura,” said the Prince of the Tree Men.

“So have I,” she replied breathlessly.

“Can you still love me?” he asked, knowing full well the answer.

“I don’t know. We’ll try.” But there was no commitment in her voice. “I don’t know what kind of relationship would satisfy me. I’m not the monogamous type.”

“I know.” Barin smiled in a manner which implied he understood her internal conflict. “You have needs.”

“Yes. Perhaps an open, liberal relationship would be the best thing.” Though her words seemed to widen the gulf between them, she found it difficult to resist him as he leaned over to kiss her. She knew the kiss would be tender. Though Zarkov kept distracting her by moving her arm around, she had never known such a tenderness. She broke away with an effort. “Not now, Barin!”

For a moment Barin’s former personality reasserted itself. “You haven’t changed!”

“Please! If I’m not at the wedding I’ll be shot!”

At that point Zarkov succeeded in cracking the code. A light stabbed out of her wrist, and the elevator door opened.

As Barin moved past her to join Zarkov, Aura succumbed to her overwhelming passions and planted a kiss on her lover that almost caused him to drop his weapon.

"Hurry!" said Zarkov.

Aura ran down the hallway, and Barin entered the elevator. As the door closed, Zarkov said, "I thought it was a prime number. Part of the Zeitman series. *I* haven't changed!"

Hawk Men jury-rigged the warship instruments that had been damaged during the battle. Flash was amazed at how quickly and efficiently they worked on the complicated equipment; he recalled Vultan had confided in him that his people had been preparing several years to revolt against Ming. The arrival of Flash and friends, which had caused events to get out of hand, had merely caught them off guard. Flash did not see any prisoners of war, and he pointedly avoided inquiries concerning their treatment. He concentrated on mastering the warship flight controls.

Biro looked up from the instruments he had been working on; he wiped his brow and smiled. "Autopilot repaired."

Vultan slapped his round belly. "Good, good. All right, everybody take off! Luro!"

"Yes?"

"Watch Biro here; see that he stays out of trouble."

Luro and Biro grinned at one another, it was clear they both would be going out of their way to find trouble once the main battle commenced.

Vultan shrugged. *Those two,* he thought warmly. "Form into a battle stream behind the rocket," he ordered. "Flash and I will bail out when the shooting starts."

As the Hawk Men filed out, Flash pushed buttons on a device in the upper right corner of his console. Numbers ran backward.

"What've you set there?" Vultan asked.

"That's how long Earth has left, Mongian time. One of your mathematicians figured it out for me. The differentials due to the space curvatures gave him trouble at first, but I almost wish he hadn't done such a good job."

The digital clock read three minutes forty-three seconds.

"Level with me, Vultan. Will this do it?"

"No doubt. They'll switch on the lightning field around the city. And when this baby hits it—BOOM! It'll blow that field dead, and my

Hawk Men fly right in." He twirled some radio dials. "Let's hear what the airwaves have to say!"

Vultan and Flash stood frozen as the traditional ceremonial music of Mongo crackled through the speaker.

Flash turned pale. "Oh my God."

Though the stoic monitors cared not for how her mannerisms indicated her emotional state of mind, Kala found their presence unnerving as she paced back and forth. Without warning, she had found herself fighting off a Hawk Man attack while Ming was engaged in a social function he would not permit to be interrupted. Sometimes she wandered to the main console, which she alone knew how to operate now that Klytus was dead, but mostly she paced the length and breadth of the room.

The face of the colonel posted at Battle Control appeared on the screen. "I am pleased to report that Rocket Ajax is returning, General Kala."

"With Gordon's body?"

"I presume so. Communications are out for some reason."

Suddenly alert, Kala dashed toward the main console. "Are they in the proper approach pattern for today?"

The colonel hesitated, licking his lips. "Actually, they are not."

"Open fire."

"On Ajax, General?"

"Open fire! All weapons! And charge the lightning field. I take personal responsibility in the Emperor's name." *Though I reserve the right to change my mind at some future date.* As the turrets' shocks reverberated throughout the castle, Kala spoke into the public address system, "Attention, all wedding guests. There is no cause for alarm. The city's weapons are being fired in continuous barrage in honor of His Imperial Majesty's wedding."

* * *

As Dale slowly marched the intricate path through rooms and the throngs of the court, her life became even more desolate. Her ornate black headdress seemed to weigh her down. She was totally unaware of Aura's renewed treachery against her father, of the escape of Barin and Zarkov, of the attack upon the city led by Flash. She had become a person without an identity; no longer an individual by any definition of the word. Cut off from her past on Earth, her future became,

impossibly, increasingly repulsive. When she heard the voice of Kala over the speakers, a twinge of hope momentarily stirred in her breast. Though she had perhaps indulged in too many attempts to make her fantasies (particularly those of a certain order) come true, she was a realist at heart, and she did nothing to nurture that hope. It was utterly impossible for Flash to have survived the explosion of the Sky Palace.

Thoughts of a similar nature went through Ming's mind as he walked up a flight of steps which led from beneath the palace hall to the altar where he had wed so many times before. He wore his finest red clothing, the gold collar of his softest jacket being formed by three circular shapes that encased his visual perceptions in a luxurious cage. The anticipation he felt for this Earth woman threatened to distract him forever from the spiritual matters of genuine importance an emperor was duty-bound to dwell upon. However, he did not regret his preoccupation with mundane affairs. To the contrary. Oneness with the universe could wait a while.

That is why Ming nodded with approval when he heard Kala explaining that the barrage of gunfire was merely a salute. He did not wonder why she had ordered this unprecedented act. Nervously rubbing the fingers of his right hand, he hurried to his wedding as quickly as his stoic façade would permit.

The gaudy city, which resembled a plastic toy from a distance, was enclosed in a net of ever-moving yellow gold bolts. Flash marveled at the power the Mongians possessed, for the city lights behind the field had not dimmed in the slightest. He was tempted to make some kind of moral judgment, but he was too busy dodging laser blasts and keeping the warship relatively on course. The ship had been hit several times, and it required all his strength to manipulate the altitude controls. Consoles hummed; exposed wires fizzled; white smoke even rose from the digital clock counting down the time remaining to Earth.

Vultan climbed up a ladder leading to the second level and an exit hatch, but he paused halfway when he realized Flash was not leaving the controls. "What are you doing? It's time to bail out."

"I forgot to tell you. I broke my rocket cycle."

"So come on. I'll carry you."

"Bail out, Vultan—quick, while you still can."

The Prince of the Hawk Men both leaped and flew toward Flash. "Are you crazy?"

"The laser fire's too heavy. You know we'll never hit that field with

nobody at the wheel."

"You'll blow to pieces, Flash! It's suicide!"

Flash tried to keep his voice steady. "No. A rational transaction—one life for billions." When Vultan grabbed his arm, he fought off the Prince. "You loony bird, go on, *get out of here!* Your men need you outside!"

White smoke intermingling with an odorous gray fume entered the control room as a terrific explosion rocked the warship; even Vultan nearly lost his footing. He regained his balance, then contemplated the Earthling as he slowly caressed his beard. "So long, Flash," he said quietly, though the volume of laser fire continued to increase. "It's been . . ."

"I know. For me too, Vultan."

The warship swerved to one side and a rear exhaust sputtered. Vultan moved for the escape ladder. He paused when he had reached midway, as Flash said, "Tell Dale I know it would have been good."

"That must be one hell of a little planet you guys have," said Vultan.

Flash shrugged. "Not too bad."

By now the city resembled not a toy, but a crazy arcade. The warship thundered forward though it was struck several times, sending showers of sparks onto the barren landscape. It thundered forward as if its metal parts had somehow become infused with Flash's tremendous will.

Behind it were the Hawk Men. They advanced bravely, avoiding the streaks of burning light stabbing through the air. Though he was horrified as a Hawk Man near him was turned into a charred parody of a man, Vultan's voice was joyous as he communicated to his men via his wrist radio: "Onward, my brave warriors! Don't, falter! Let this be known forever as Flash Gordon's day!"

General Kala was dealing with the many communication breakdowns hampering her defense of the city when Barin and Zarkov burst into the room. Holding his laser at the monitors, Barin said, "Freeze, you bloody bastards! Freeze!"

The monitors, who up until that point had still spoken aloud, quietly informing Kala what they saw and what they were doing, instantly complied. Their sudden silence was eerie.

Standing behind the central console, Kala withdrew a laser pistol from her black leather holster. Barin instantly spun on his heel and

shot the pistol from her hand. It twirled on the floor until it stopped cold in a corner.

Zarkov advanced toward Kala. “Take us to Ming!”

Kala said indignantly, “We do not lead traitors to the Imperial Presence.”

“I’ve heard that story many times before,” said Zarkov. “Don’t worry; we’ll find a way. Barin, why don’t you grab an imager from one of those agents?”

“Certainly,” said Barin eagerly. He tore an imager off the nearest monitor. Sparks flew and static resounded throughout the room as the Prince recoiled in unexpected horror. For the monitor did not possess eyes; instead, frayed wires protruded from his empty sockets. The monitor screamed silently and lowered his head against the console; a moment later the remaining monitors did likewise.

Zarkov rubbed his beard. “I wonder why I didn’t know they were cyborgs. Guess that information must be Level Seven.”

Unseen by both the intruders, Kala moved around the console and withdrew a slim tube from her boot. She aimed it at Zarkov, pressed a button. A tremendous jet of flame roared from the tube, singeing the scientist’s head, before Barin spoiled her aim by firing his laser directly into her chest. Collapsing, having expired instantly, she slid partway down the steps that separated the main console from the monitors.

Before Zarkov could thank Barin, the colonel from Battle Control appeared on the screen. “Rocket Ajax is still approaching. We guarantee its destruction when it reaches the lightning field. Life-form scanners identify Earthling Gordon at the controls.”

“Holy Moley!” exclaimed Zarkov. “We’ve got to do something!”

“General Kala?” said the colonel. “Will you please show yourself on the screen?”

Barin fired the laser toward the image of the colonel, and the communication device exploded with a crashing and hissing.

“We’ve got to deactivate that lightning field!” said Zarkov, rubbing his hands, anxious to get to work. “Not only that, but we’ve got to save the Earth!”

“Admirable goals, both of them,” said Barin, “but how can we accomplish them?”

“Thanks to my Level Six indoctrination, I think I can override the field controls here. Your mission, whether or not you choose to accept it, is to destroy the control panel of the third atomic generator near the pits of radioactive material.”

“But they’re too far away. I’ll never make it!”

Zarkov tapped his forehead. “I know a shortcut. Listen now, I’ve only got time to say this once. Go down the hall, make a left . . .”

A definite shortage of oxygen in the warship began to affect Flash’s performance. He felt dizzy. He knew he was going to die, but he had hoped it would be quicker than death by suffocation. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, Flash managed to keep the warship on course.

* * *

Though her heart was pounding, Dale felt numb, practically deceased, as the short, balding priest Zogi, who possessed wayward clumps of gray hair and an obsequious manner unrivaled in all Mongo, performed the barbaric marriage ceremony. Dale, flanked by guards, stared at Ming standing opposite her. She was mesmerized by an unwelcome fascination with the evil aura of his unrepentant personality. His stoic façade had crumbled, and his lean features struggled to contain the expression of his pleasure.

“Do you, Ming the Merciless, Rightful Ruler of the Universe, take this Earthling to be your Empress of the Hour?”

“I do.”

“I don’t!” said Dale, futilely trying to pull away from the guards.

“Do you promise to use her as you will?” the priest asked.

“I do,” said Ming. His anticipation was keen.

“Not to blast her into space?”

Ming raised an eyebrow and glared.

Zogi cleared his throat. “Until such time as you grow weary of her?”

At that moment, Barin exchanged fire with red-robed guards in the corridor. As he hid in a recess, there was a hubbub of confusion as the guards got their orders mixed up. Barin took advantage of the situation and blasted them. He retrieved a high-powered laser from a tripod and, carrying it in both hands, rushed down the corridor. His greatest fear was that he had run out of time.

“The ring,” Ming said sternly.

Zogi’s eyes widened as he glanced at his aides. The second aide finally produced a crystal ring. Wide-eyed and perspiring, the priest gave it to Ming, who held it before Dale. A guard roughly lifted her

hand into position, and Ming forced the ring onto her finger.

"Repeat after me, Your Majesty: With this ring I thee wed . . ."

"With this ring I thee wed . . ."

* * *

The lightning field was but a few seconds away when Flash heard the final vow of the ceremony over the radio. He had thought he would feel anger or sorrow, but instead he felt nothing, not even regret that he was about to die. He bit his lower lip. "Poor Dale. What a damn shame."

Barin fired into the door and kicked it down. Before the startled Power Men could react, he began shooting at all the regulating devices and other controls. The machinery coughed up red smoke. A soldier on guard aimed a weapon, but Barin cut him in two.

Meanwhile, Zarkov pressed a button at the smoking console in the monitoring room. He had worked feverishly for the last two minutes, but now he experienced an elation much like Barin's.

Flash did not know the lightning field had been switched off until the warship had nearly crashed into the castle.

The wedding guests had realized it seconds earlier, and Zogi and his aides had realized it before they. The priest's eyes practically popped from their sockets, something they always did when panic gripped his soul and he lost faith in his gods (which occurred with alarming frequency). Knowing that his subconscious would forever regret he had not kissed the bride, knowing that escaping the oncoming rocket was more important than a little sexual titillation any day, he hiked up his robes and ran from the altar as quickly as his stumpy little legs would take him.

Ming raised an eyebrow.

The Emperor of the Universe saw Dale fleeing into the doorway from which she had emerged onto the altar. He wondered why the guards had not detained her. He noticed the guards fleeing from the palace hall. In fact, the entire wedding reception was running amok in all directions; the caterers had overturned the tables of food in their haste to find an exit.

At this point Ming could not fail to perceive the warship bearing down upon the gigantic picture window of the palace hall. The huge

tine fixed to the bow seemed to call for him as the warship crashed through the window with an ear-splitting noise future generations would say was heard 'round the universe.

Ming ran to the right, he ran to the left, but in the end he stood where he knew the Fates had dictated he stand: in the center of the wedding platform. He did not feel pain, he did not experience fear, he only stared in astonishment as he grasped the tine which had passed through his chest. He did not hate Gordon, nor did he curse the Fates. For he knew during those moments, as only one who frequently communed with the universe could know, that he had been destined to lose.

As the Ajax crashed into the palace hall, it propelled Ming with it off the platform; his weight tipped it over as it came to rest, and he eventually appeared to be standing on the lower level, though in actuality the Ajax was supporting him.

Ming pulled himself forward on the tine. He left it vibrating behind him, coated with blue blood and pieces of his internal organs. Tenaciously holding on to life despite the inevitable, Ming knelt, tried to stand, refused to fall.

The blond Earthling, pale and shaken from his harrowing experience, crawled from the wreckage and retrieved a golden sword from the rubble. He raised it, fully prepared to use it if necessary.

"You could have been ruler of a kingdom," said Ming hoarsely, defiantly turning his ring on Flash even as his life ebbed away.

"Turn off the generators and I'll spare your life," Flash said.

Ming's upper lip curled in a snarl. "My life is not for anyone to take."

"Your power is fading," said Flash. He was fascinated at how Ming was becoming transparent before him, though he knew he should have been occupied with other matters.

Closing his eyes, Ming turned his ring on himself. He sent his will to uncharted realms, he divested himself of his considerable ego. The cold matter of the universe called. The myriad planes and dimensions of space became easily accessible to him. And as he sent his mind to the aforementioned uncharted realms, his atoms loosened their mutual bondage and became a red gas that flowed into his ring as if it had been sucked up by a vacuum cleaner.

For a long moment the ring stayed in the air; then it dropped onto the floor.

Flash lowered the sword.

Dale emerged from the doorway. Running toward him, she

exclaimed, “Flash, Flash!”

Vultan entered the palace through the rubble created by the Ajax. “Congratulations, Flash! You’ve won!”

Barin burst through a doorway directly opposite Vultan. He held his weapon high. “I’ve destroyed the generator controls! The Earth is saved!”

At that point, the globe which had disintegrated the Lizard Man and Zarkov’s pistol flew into the room and halted in front of Flash. The victors tensed, Flash stepping before them.

“Hail, Flash Gordon, conqueror of Mongo!” said the globe.

Shouting with delight, Flash leaped into the air, and pandemonium erupted throughout the courtroom.

13

The End? Well, Maybe . . .

As the court applauded and cheered, Vultan raised his sword. “Barin is the rightful heir!”

Led by Luro and Biro, the court shouted, “Hail, Barin, King of Mongo!”

Barin grinned, bowed, and said, “We owe everything to Flash Gordon!” He gestured for the Earthling and his two companions to join him on the upper level of the palace hall, and the Mongians cheered their saviors from the stars.

“We appoint Vultan general of our armies. From this day on, every breed of Mongo shall live in peace.” Barin turned to Aura, put his arm about her waist. “And we cordially invite you all to the wedding of your new King and Aura, daughter of the deposed Emperor, three days hence.”

As the court cheered again, Aura passionately kissed Barin. “My hero,” she whispered.

Zarkov smiled at Dale. “Somewhere on Earth the sun is rising.”

“Oh, I bet it’s a beauty,” Dale said. “Will we ever get home again, Hans?”

“I don’t know. We’ll try.”

“We certainly invite you all to stay,” said Barin.

“What do you think?” Flash asked Dale. “Could you get used to it here?”

Dale shook her head. “I’m a New York girl. It’s pretty quiet around here for me.”

However, as the attention of all was fixed upon the Hawk Men saluting Flash in the red sky, no one noticed a gloved hand taking Ming’s ring from the rubble and concealing it beneath the folds of a robe.